

Litter Box Problems in Cats

There are three main causes for a cat to eliminate outside its litter box:

1. **MEDICAL PROBLEMS SUCH AS UTI (Urinary Tract Infection)** or other physical problems such as liver or kidney malfunction or the development of diabetes. The cat then establishes a new habit of eliminating outside the litter box.
2. **DIRTY LITTER BOX.** Litter boxes should be cleaned at least once daily and there should be an adequate number of boxes if you have a multiple cat household (one box per cat is a good rule of thumb with the addition of an extra box if the population is higher than four cats).
3. **ANXIETY.** Stress created by situations such as a moving into a new home, new human family member (such as a new spouse, new baby, newly adopted child, etc), addition of a new pet, outside stray cats, too high a feline population within the household itself, improper introduction of a new cat/pet, construction/remodeling in the household and so on.

TO REMEDY THE PROBLEM:

FIRST, HAVE A COMPLETE MEDICAL EXAMINATION PERFORMED on your animal by a licensed veterinarian. Tell your vet about the problem behavior so he can look for physical troubles that are causing or contributing to the problem. Until you can get an appointment with your vet, go ahead and confine the cat to a "cat room" (see details below) to limit damage to your household.

SECONDLY, MAKE SURE YOU ARE CLEANING THE LITTER BOXES AT LEAST ONCE DAILY and do completely change (dump) the litter every seven to ten days (for litter box tips, please read our web page on litterbox training at http://www.hssv.org/behavior/cat/litter_box.htm). Try offering two different litter boxes side by side but with different brands of litter. Some cats do have strong preferences for one type of litter over others. Generally speaking, plain unscented scoopable (clumping) litter is a very strong choice of many cats. Make sure you have enough litter boxes for the number of cats within your household. Make sure the boxes are located in quiet, easily accessible places within your household. Avoid placing boxes in noisy laundry rooms or in a garage where your cat does not have easy access. If you have recently changed litter brands, go back to the old brand when the cat was using the box on a consistent basis.

AVOID ANY TYPE OF PUNISHMENT INCLUDING VERBAL SCOLDING OR PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT (don't even show your pet the spot later or rub its nose in it, etc.) If your cat's litter box problem is anxiety related, then all of those punishment methods will cause it to become worse! Putting the cat outside will do NOTHING to fix the problem and may actually cause it to get worse as well; especially if the cause may be stray cats roaming your neighborhood.

CLEAN UP ALL THE ACCIDENTS WITH AN ENZYME CLEANER, Nature's Miracle and Anti-Icky Poo are only two of the many brands available at a local pet store. Household cleaners will NOT take care of the minute amount of leftover



scent that a cat will detect. If the cat has urinated on carpeting, make sure to soak the underlying carpet pad with enzyme cleaner as well. Try to find ALL places where the cat may have eliminated and do a thorough cleaning job.

CONFINEMENT – A CAT ROOM. Confine the pet in question to a prepared “cat room” whenever you cannot watch it directly. The “cat room” can be a small bathroom, small office or even a large wire dog crate. It should contain a clean litterbox in one corner with food, water, bedding, toys and scratching post in the opposite corner. The advantage of using a wire dog crate is that it can be located in the living room or kitchen so the cat does not feel so isolated from the family. Keep the cat in confinement when you are sleeping/ cooking/ eating/ at work etc. If the cat will sit in your lap as you read or watch TV, great. But the second you can not directly watch the cat, it goes back into it’s confinement area.

The cat does need to come out at least twice daily for exercise, social attention and daily brushing but returns to the confinement area when you cannot supervise the animal directly. If your cat still does not use the box when confined in its “cat room”, then make the confinement area smaller.

In very difficult cases, you can the large wire dog crate and rig a shelf above a completely littered-covered floor. The shelf can have the cups for the food and water wired to the walls of the crate. Over several weeks, decrease the size of the litter-covered floor until it is finally in a litter box. Allow gradual freedom in the house if the cat can remain “clean”. The crate can be located in the living room so the cat is not isolated from people during this re-training period.

Confinement time should be one week per month of the duration of the problem. If this has been an long standing problem (one year or more), then plan on this confinement re-training for at least eight weeks then slowly give more freedom throughout the household as long as the cat keeps the household “clean”.

Do try to keep your cat on a regular daily schedule of play and socialization with you. If it is anxiety related then your pet does need to be able to count on regular, daily times that your pet can get attention/play/exercise from you. Again, avoid any

type of punishment and consider using confinement until your pet adjusts to the new stressors in your household. In very difficult anxiety cases, you can consult your veterinarian for anti-anxiety medication.

Again, please have a full physical workup done on your animal because no matter what else you may try, it will fail if the cat has a physical problem.

If you have additional questions or have tried everything above, please call our FREE Animal Behavior Help line at 408/727-3383, ext. 753 or use our email The Behaviorist web page at www.hssv.org/behavior/cat_behavior.htm