



Litter Box Problems

“OH NO!” “He’s not using the box!” The shout of frustration rings out. We understand. This is one of the most frustrating problems with a cat. Cats always have a reason for not using the box you provide. However, the challenge is discovering that reason. Here are some ideas that might help you discover what’s going on.

Who is doing it?

If you have only one cat, it’s obvious who the culprit is. If you have more than one, however, the first thing you need to do is figure out which one is responsible. You can try isolating cats into separate rooms and see if they use the litter box or not. This method isn’t always successful, though, as some cats won’t use a box when confined.



In order to isolate a specific cat, talk to your veterinarian about adding fluorescein dye to the cat’s food and check the urine with a black light. The dye will glow in the urine. Do this with one cat at a time. If a cat is defecating outside the box, you can mix some shredded crayons into the food (a different color for each cat). Check the stool that is outside the box for the color.

Medical causes



The next thing you need to do is have your cat examined by your veterinarian. In addition, a urine sample and stool sample (if stool is outside of the box)

should be tested as well. A urinary tract infection or other condition could be the underlying cause.

Remember, though, a cat may have both a medical problem and behavioral problem at the same time. Treat the medical issue first and see if the problem clears up.

Some cats that have had pain when they use the box don’t want to go back to it for fear it will hurt. They may also have decided they like the new area better. If that is the case, you will need to go through some of the steps to encourage your cat to use the box again.

Marking territory - Spraying

Some cats are marking their territory. People refer to this as “spraying” because the cat will urinate small amounts on a vertical surface. This situation usually requires a different approach than the one used for cats that aren’t using their litter boxes for other reasons.

Why they are doing it and what to do about it

Here are some of the possible reasons your cat may not use its box. Try them one at a time if you aren’t sure what the cause is to see if you find success.

The box isn’t clean enough

- Although some cats don’t seem to care what condition their box is in, others can be quite fastidious. Start with having at least one more box than you have cats. For example, if you are lucky to have three cats sharing your home, you need to have four boxes for them.
- Scoop them at least once a day (some cats require twice daily) and wash the boxes at least once a week. Do not use ammonia based or strong smelling cleaners.
- You may get a hint that this is the cause if your cat uses the box right after it has been cleaned, but goes elsewhere later on in the day or the next day.

The box is in the wrong location

- If you have recently changed the location of the box, move it back to its original spot and see if the problem is fixed.
- Place a box in the area where your cat is going and see if he uses it. If so, very gradually (like an inch a day – yes, that little) move it to a location you prefer.

- Cats prefer areas that are quiet but where they feel they can escape if needed.



Keep children and dogs away from the box. Be sure it's not near a noisy appliance that may bother them.

- Have a box on every floor level, especially if you have a kitten, elderly, or sick cat that may have some difficulty with stairs.

Your cat doesn't like the litter

- If you recently changed the type or brand of litter, change it back.
- Some cats don't like scented litters.
- If your cat eliminates on soft items, try a soft type of litter. Most cats prefer clumping litter. If your cat is going on carpet, you can try a section of carpeting in the litter box. You will need to change it frequently, but you may be able to sprinkle a little litter on top of it and gradually get your cat to use litter. Some cats will use shredded newspaper.



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- If your cat urinates on smooth surfaces, offer an empty litter box with a small amount of litter on one end. Place the box on a hard surface rather than on carpeting.

- Put dirt in the litter box if your cat is used to going outdoors.
- There may be too much or too little litter in the box (most of the time it's too little). Start with one to two inches.

Your cat doesn't like the box

- The size may be wrong, and, if so, it's usually too small.
- The sides may be too high or too low. If you have an elderly cat or one with arthritis, he may have trouble climbing into the box.
- Many cats don't like a cover on the box.
- Don't use a liner in the box.
- If you have an automatic self-cleaning box, change to a regular one.

There has been a change in the environment, your cat's routine, or your cat is stressed

- Cats like routine and they like their life to be predictable.
- Many things can affect your cat or cause stress. Any of these could be the trigger causing your cat to avoid the litter box.
 - Moving to a new house
 - Animals or people moving in or out of the home
 - A change in your routine
 - Conflict with cats or other pets in the house
 - Cat activity outside

General steps to take

- Use a black light to locate all areas that have been urinated on.
- Clean all soiled areas with an enzymatic cleaner designed to eliminate odor. This **must** be done before you use another carpet cleaner.



- Discourage your cat from using these areas by placing an upside down carpet runner (nubby side up), foil, or double-sided sticky tape there. If the area is carpeted, try a plastic floor guard (like under office chairs) to cover the area. Placing food or water dishes there may also help.



- If a routine has changed, change back if possible.
- Feliway®, a pheromone that can reduce stress in cats, can be used around the house.
- Prevent other animals from harassing the cat.
- Keep other cats out of your yard with an automatic sprinkler or keep windows covered.
- Improve the environment and enrichment in the home. Provide places for each cat to hide and climb. Play with your cat daily.

Professional help

We understand how frustrating this problem can be. Keep at it, though. You can solve the problem most of the time, although it can take time and effort.

Unfortunately, despite your best efforts, your cat may still not use his litter box all the time. If anxiety or stress is underlying it, you may need medication from your veterinarian. There may be more than one reason behind it and that complicates the treatment. Often, a professional behaviorist can help you find a solution.

