

The Unabridged Guide to Litterbox Problems



Part One: How to Prevent Housesoiling Problems

Nothing puts Kitty in the proverbial "doghouse" like a urine spot on the carpeting. Feline behaviorists find that inappropriate elimination problems (i.e. inconsistent litterbox use) top the list of the behavior aberrations with which they deal. It is also a major reason for cats to be surrendered to shelters or pounds. The good news is that housesoiling problems are preventable.

An understanding of what Kitty looks for in a desirable toilet area reveals preferences that are not unlike our own. For example, it must be clean, private, and easily accessible. They also have some requirements that are based on innate survival instincts--it must contain an easily-raked substrate and it must offer escape potential. Although our pets live in the safety and comfort of our homes, from their point of view these considerations are still vital to their well-being. This survival know-how is pre-programmed in your cat's brain just as it was in his ancestor, the North African Wildcat, *Felis Silvestris Libica*--a cat who had unlimited access to a sandy substrate. By covering his waste he was able to elude detection by prey or potential predators. He was also alert to the danger of being caught in a vulnerable position so escape potential was a life-saving priority.

How does all this translate into setting up the ideal litterbox situation in your home? If we look at it from the cat's point of view, we will make decisions that will be in harmony with the cat's basic nature and it will optimize the likelihood that Kitty will find it acceptable. New products are popping up every day suggesting that they can take the mess, smell and work out of litterbox maintenance. For most people the litterbox regimen is the most unappealing aspect of cat ownership. Manufacturers of litter and litterboxes capitalize on this fact and offer a dizzying array of products meant to make this onerous task more agreeable. It can all be very confusing to the well-meaning, but not well-informed, cat owner. Should the litterbox be open or hooded? Should the litter be scented or fragrance-free? Should the litter be clumping or non-clumping? What about liners?

Decision-making should always be based on what is most natural from the cat's standpoint. What would Kitty use if he were in the great outdoors? He would look for a soft, rakeable substrate (e.g. garden soil). There would be no artificial fragrance and of course, no liners. He would have plenty of room to perform his elimination ritual of sniffing, digging, squatting and turning around. A clean spot would be selected each time--at least six inches from the last location used.

Now how do we meet these requirements in the indoor environment? Let's start with the litterbox. Select a box that is at least 16" x 22". Avoid boxes that have rims that slant inward--they cut out a lot of interior space for the cat and are awkward for the cat to enter. The sides can be six inches deep unless the litterbox is for a small kitten or a handicapped cat. Some of the best litterboxes are not sold in pet stores but are labeled as "all-purpose tubs" in hardware stores. People whose cats like to throw the litter out of the box or who overshoot the box by not squatting down enough while urinating, have found that a large, high-sided storage box (minus the cover) works well to contain the mess. An entryway can be cut into one side to allow for easy access.

Hooded, or covered, litterboxes are popular with consumers, but if cats did the shopping, they would be left on the shelves. Humans do not want to see or smell what Kitty leaves behind in the litterbox, but for that matter, neither does Kitty. The hooded litterbox forces him to enter a cramped, cave-like structure that concentrates odors inside giving it an "outhouse" effect. Since the cat's sense of smell is at least 14 times more sensitive than ours, this may be all it takes to send Kitty packing and in search of a fresher smelling toilet area--quite likely a corner of the diningroom. Unlike the hooded litterbox, the diningroom offers a spacious area with escape potential. This is especially important to felines in multi-cat families where litterbox ambushes are likely to occur.

Feline behaviorists agree that the ideal number of litterboxes in the household is one per cat, plus one. So even if there is just one cat in the home, there should be two litterboxes available to him. Many cats have a strong instinct to urinate in one area and defecate in another. The litterboxes should not be grouped together, but should be placed in different parts of the home, preferably on different floors. For people without a lot of extra room in their house, a corner litterbox is a space efficient way to fit in that extra box. SmartCat makes a well designed one (www.esmartcat.com). Once the placement of the boxes has been decided, it is unwise to move them. Cats are very location oriented and will continue to visit an area previously used. The chosen locations must be convenient and cat-friendly. Cats like to see all around them when eliminating--especially the entrance to the room. If the litterbox is in a room that is very dark at night, it is a good idea to install a small night light. (Cats don't see any better than we do in complete darkness, however, they see very well in low light.)

The true story of Susan and her cat Sammy illustrates the advisability of providing litterboxes on different floors of the home. Susan called one day when she was truly at the end of her rope. Her best friend and companion, Sammy, was totally out of control and she had no idea why. For three years he had never missed his litterbox which was located in her beautifully refinished basement. After arriving home from work this fateful day, she discovered to her horror that Sammy had eliminated all over the main floor of her house. She immediately whisked him off to the veterinarian, expecting to hear that a serious health condition had precipitated this bizarre behavior. To her relief and dismay, Sammy was pronounced perfectly healthy. "So why would he do this after years of impeccable litterbox manners?" Her question was followed by a series of probing questions from the counselor. During the course of the conversation, it became clear to the staff member that sometime during Susan's absence Sammy had become frightened of going into the basement. She was reluctant to accept this explanation because he had always been happy and comfortable on the lower level.

Under protest Susan agreed to humor the counselor and check out the basement to see if anything was amiss. The culprit was found lying not far from Sammy's litterbox. It was an old scrolled up calendar that she had stored in the rafters. Our guess is that it took flight from its resting spot in the ceiling at the same time Sammy was attending to business. Convinced that a large predatory bird had invaded his sanctuary, he ran for his life. Poor Sammy. Poor Susan. This whole mess could have been avoided if there had been a second litterbox upstairs.

Cats are almost neurotic about their need to feel safe and secure while they are eliminating. They live in a sensory world entirely separate from ours. They hear things we can't hear and they smell things we can't smell. They are far more sensitive to vibration than we are. The slightest sound or disturbance can convince Kitty that his bathroom is a dangerous place--a furnace kicking in, clothes clanking in the dryer, a thunderstorm rattling the house. Even the family dog can make the cat nervous about using his litterbox, especially if Fido has access to the litterbox area. (Pet gates that Kitty can scoot under but which the dog cannot negotiate work well to keep the dog's nose out of the cat's business.)

The selection of a proper and appealing litter substrate is high on your cat's priority list. To please Kitty the litter must be absorbent, unscented (cats dislike perfume), soft to the touch and familiar. In preference tests the majority of cats choose the sand-like clumping litter over the traditional non-

clumping litter. This is not really so surprising if you have ever stepped barefoot on non-clumping litter. Ouch! Declawed cats in particular require the comfort afforded by the finer-grained scoopable litters. Everclean ES (formerly known as Everclean HD) is a litter that has proven to be popular with cats and their owners due to its superior ability to clump firmly. A good second choice is Scoop Away Fragrance Free. * Please note that we do not recommend the use of clumping clay-based litters for kittens under the age of four months. Small kittens often ingest litter particles and this could pose a health risk. A non-clumping clay-based litter is fine for the little ones.

The advent of clumping litters has made the task of cleaning the litterbox much less onerous. However, there is a significant difference in the quality of clumping litters. The poorer quality litters break up easily when scooped, leaving particles of waste behind which will smell to the cat if not to you. These litters should be scooped daily and dumped completely at least a couple times a week. The more firmly clumping litters should also be scooped daily, but they do not have to be totally changed nearly as often--generally only when the litterbox itself requires washing. Since it is impossible to remove the urine from non-clumping litters, they should be scooped daily and dumped every other day (every day would be even better--would you want to use a toilet that was flushed only a few times a week?)

When it is time to wash the litterbox, use very hot water and dishwashing liquid. The use of bleach or other strong chemicals can leave a lingering scent in the box which might repel the cat. Even after a thorough cleaning, Kitty should still be able to detect his own unique scent. This is an important cue to the cat to return to this location the next time nature calls.

For most cats a litter depth of about three inches is satisfactory. With this amount of litter the urine usually does not stick to the bottom of the litterbox. Some cats find too much litter disturbing--much like sinking into quicksand. To discover your cat's preference you can shift the litter in a large litterbox to one side so that there is a gradation of litter depth. Note the areas the cat prefers using and that may be your best clue as to the level of litter with which he is most comfortable.

At least 80% of cat owners find that their cat's housesoiling problems are completely resolved just by following our very specific recommendations for setting up and maintaining the litterboxes. It is important, however, that the cat owner never abruptly remove what is familiar to the cat. Cats don't like changes but they do like choices; so instead, place the new litterbox and the new litter next to the old one until Kitty has decided to give it a try. If it

becomes evident that it has become his clear favorite, then, and only then, can the old litter or litterbox be safely eliminated.

Sometimes our recommendations for litterbox improvements are met with, "but he has always had only one litterbox" or "he has always used the same litter". We offer this explanation, "All cats have a certain stress threshold. The level may vary among cats depending on their individual personalities and temperaments. When everything in the cat's life is going smoothly, a few discomforts can be tolerated. If additional stressors enter the cat's experience, stressors that cannot be eliminated, such as a new baby, houseguests, or the move to a new home, then suddenly the stress threshold is exceeded and Kitty's misery is expressed in wet and not-so-wonderful ways. We can reduce the possibility of pushing Kitty over the top by eliminating the stressors over which we do have control (e.g. the litterbox annoyances). Then we can work to minimize the cat's stress by gently introducing and desensitizing him to those elements in his life with which he must learn to cope."

Part Two: How to Solve Housesoiling Problems

Cats urinating on beds, couches, carpeting, and even their owners--why do some cats enjoy scratching around in their litterboxes to the point of absurdity while others will use the litterbox only sporadically or will avoid it entirely as though it were a cat-eating monster? One desperate cat owner confessed that her cat, Mitzi, had not defecated in the litterbox for 11 years! Another cat owner hadn't cleaned the litterbox for three months because her cat, Jed, wouldn't go near it. She did, however, have to clean her bed linens on a daily basis because Jed reliably chose the bed for his bathroom, even when she was in it.

Not all cat owners are as long-suffering as these two, but all of them love their cats and want to see the end of a problem that is severely straining their relationship with their furry friend. Is it possible to correct housesoiling problems with any degree of certainty that they will not recur? The answer is "yes", provided that the owner is willing to follow some important recommendations that will work with the cat's basic nature and instincts to modify the behavior. It's not difficult or expensive to solve problems of inappropriate elimination, but it does require a willingness to see life from the cat's point of view.

Cats are pre-programmed to seek out an easily-raked substrate in which to eliminate. That's why kittens need very little training. Just place them in a litterbox after a big meal and their instincts take over. If Kitty is not selecting the litterbox as her preferred area, then something is wrong. Perhaps she has a urinary or intestinal disorder that makes elimination uncontrollable or painful. She may be associating the litterbox with her discomfort and is therefore avoiding it. It is important to know that there may be no obvious symptoms of a health problem (cats are masters at hiding pain) other than the cat's inconsistent use of the litterbox. It is always advisable to first rule out health considerations by taking Kitty to the veterinarian. In the case of inappropriate urination, a urinalysis is a good first procedure. If the problem is defecation, a fresh stool sample will be needed. Cats that are six months of age or older should be spayed or neutered to prevent urine marking. If the cat is already urine marking, sterilization may not help as the marking may be a behavioral problem that needs to be addressed.

If the problem is not Kitty's health or hormones, then perhaps the litterbox is the problem. Is she eliminating near the litterbox, but not in it? If so, this may indicate that her intent was to use the litterbox, but for some reason, she just couldn't bring herself to get into it. Usually this is because it is too dirty. Remember that cats are self-cleaning. They are not going to

voluntarily step into moist or dirty litter that they will later have to clean off their paws or fur. (If they weren't so fastidious, would we really want them to walk all over our homes and furnishings?) Since their senses are far more acute than ours, what is not offensive to us may be unbearable to them.

Have you changed litters? Is the new litter a different texture or scent? Being creatures of habit cats don't appreciate sudden changes. Don't surprise Kitty with the new litter you bought on sale today or she may surprise you with a present of her own. The money you saved on litter can be easily negated by the cost of cleaning products necessary to neutralize Kitty's objection. If you want to introduce a new litter to your cat, place a litterbox containing the new litter next to her old litterbox. Add a scent cue to the new litter letting her know that it is intended for her use by taking a small amount of urine or stool from the old box and placing it in the new litter. If after several weeks she is using the new litter enthusiastically, then you can dispense with the old litter. However, if she tries it only occasionally, don't risk offering the new litter exclusively. Remember that it is Kitty's preferences, not yours, that count when it comes to the litterbox.

If the litter you are using is scented or if you are adding a fragranced deodorizer to the litter, you can immediately eliminate this irritant from the equation and at the same time improve your cat's quality of life. Perfume is a very effective cat repellent.

The feel of the litter is also of great interest to the cat. An abrupt change from a sand-like litter to a pellet or crystal variety may shake her world (and soil yours!). Declawed cats tend to be especially sensitive to the litter texture. Most cats prefer the feel of the scoopable litters. Everclean ES (formerly known as Everclean HD) is a favorite with the cats and cat owners. A good second choice is Scoop Away Fragrance Free. (We do not recommend clumping litters for kittens under the age of four months.)

Sometimes the solution to a housesoiling problem is as simple as adding another litterbox, keeping the boxes cleaner, removing the hoods, eliminating the liners, or offering a more natural litter substrate. When the litterbox improvements do not effect a change for the better, and the cat has been given a clean bill of health by the veterinarian, then it is time to consider other possible stressors.

Cats are very intelligent and sensitive little creatures that are highly reactive to their environment (some more so than others) and the stress target in cats is their bladders. Most people recognize the obvious stressors: a new

baby, a new pet, remodeling or moving to a new home but the more subtle stressors may be overlooked: less attention from the cat's favorite person due to a revised work schedule, infrequent or inadequate feedings, the scent of another cat on a visitor's clothing, the sight of a stray cat from the window. We may not be aware of Kitty's anxiety until we actually step in it. (This is a good time to remember that punishment never corrects inappropriate elimination problems, but it can make them worse by increasing the cat's stress.)

Sometimes it takes the skill of a detective to determine what is upsetting the cat. The location of the urine or fecal marking may suggest a cause. For example, the cat who urinates on beds, clothes, or even directly in front of the owner, is often trying to communicate: 1) a painful health problem, 2) severe discomfort over an environmental stressor, or 3) distress relating to the individual whose belongings are being soiled. Ironically, cats often seek out the comforting scent of their favorite person when they are in pain or are stressed, but occasionally, a cat will selectively urinate on items belonging to the individual who annoys or frightens the cat.

If the urine or fecal marking is located near a window or patio door, the culprit could be a stray cat. The sight of another animal so close to Kitty's home base often triggers territorial marking, especially spraying. These problems are most common in spring when free-roaming cats are more likely to frequent yards and porches. When the windows are opened and the soft spring breeze wafts into the home, so does the urine scent of the local tom cat who left his wet calling card on the front door the night before.

There are a few creative products on the market designed to keep animal trespassers out of your yard. One of the newest ones is the Scarecrow--a clever device that hooks up to your hose and works with a motion detector. As the animal approaches the forbidden area, the Scarecrow turns toward the offender and squirts him. (For more information check out www.scatmat.com.) A simpler solution is to keep the drapes or blinds shut at times outside animals are most likely to approach the house. If this happens only at night, then Kitty can be made comfortable in another area of the house away from the room with the view.

It may be the cats inside the home that are stressing the problem cat. There is a strong correlation between the number of cats in the household and spraying behavior. If there is competition for food, litterboxes, favorite resting areas, or attention from the owner, then there is likely to be some jockeying for dominance which often involves urine marking. In multi-cat families it is advisable to break up the areas of biological significance to the

cats by having several feeding stations, by placing litterboxes in different parts of the house and by having lots of cozy hide-outs and resting areas, preferably in high places. Since the most important resource in the cat's territory is the owner, the food provider, tensions can be greatly eased if each cat is given some individual attention during the day. If these measures are not sufficient to harmonize the relationships in the cat family, then it may be necessary to separate certain cats in different parts of the house or it may be in the cats best interests to re-home one or more of them.

One product that is effective in reducing or eliminating the incidence of territorial spraying is Feliway (Abbot Laboratories, Chicago, IL). This analogue of facial pheromones can be sprayed on prominent objects in the cat's environment. When the cat sniffs the pheromone, the chemical message reads something like this, "All is well. This spot has been marked facially--no need for urine marking". Feliway and directions for its use can be obtained through us.

Another approach to reducing the anxiety of cats that are urine marking is drug therapy. It is most effective when used along with environmental modifications. The anti-anxiety medication has proven to be effective in cats from multi-cat households.

No housesoiling problem can be completely cured without addressing the need to clean and neutralize the soiled areas. If the scent lingers, it will be a constant reminder to the cat that this area was once used as a litterbox alternative and that it can be used again. In the case of a vertical urine mark (from spraying) the slowly fading scent will remind Kitty that his chemical message needs to be freshened. While many products promise to eliminate the odor of cat urine, few actually do. Anti-Icky Poo, a strong enzymatic product, is effective. If it sufficiently soaks into the carpeting or upholstery and reaches the urine, it will break it down and the smell will be gone. You can get Anti-Icky Poo through us.

To accurately identify the areas that need cleaning rent or purchase an ultra-violet light. The urine should fluoresce under the light, saving your nose from having to sniff out the problem spots. If you live with a group of cats and are unsure as to who is the culprit, you can give one of the suspects a small amount of fluorescein (obtainable from your veterinarian). This can be given orally to the cat each day. Under the ultraviolet light this cat's urine will show up as a glowing green spot--with no harm to the cat (other than the stigma of having been identified as the perpetrator).

After the soiled areas have been thoroughly cleaned, place solid air fresheners in these locations to break Kitty's habit of revisiting the scene of the crime. Experiment with different fragrances to discover which is most repelling to your cat. Keep in mind that many cats dislike a citrus smell. Spray repellents and plug-in air fresheners are not a good choice because it is difficult to determine at what point have lost their effectiveness and should be renewed.

Deterrents should remain in place for at least a month after Kitty has been using the litterbox regularly. When the treated areas are dry, a vinyl carpet runner can be placed (spike side up!) in the problem area. Small motion detectors are also very effective at keeping cats out of selected locations. Radio Shack sells a mini-motion detector for about \$25 that works well with cats (Cat. No. 49-425). Don't be tempted to protect the area by covering it with plastic as many cats particularly enjoy urinating on plastic.

This aversion conditioning along with the attraction strategy of providing a highly appealing litterbox near the previously soiled area solves a majority of inappropriate elimination problems. Some cats, however, require a short re-training or re-conditioning period. This is accomplished by restricting the cat to a comfortable room with its litterboxes, food and water (never near the litterboxes), bed and toys. Confinement should not be considered punishment and the cat should be regularly visited and played with during this re-training period. Any excursions outside the room should be carefully monitored and gradually lengthened until the cat can be left out with confidence. By affording no opportunity for deviant behavior, the proper behavior becomes routine.

Re-conditioning the cat to eliminate exclusively in designated areas is particularly useful in cases where the reason for the inconsistent litterbox use is not well understood. Kirsten Kranz, Cats International's coordinator for the Racine/Kenosha Behavior Hotline frequently handles challenging housesoiling cases. Recently she received a cat from another state that had come to the attention of a caring individual who wished to save this friendly and unusual feline. "Matt" (Kirsten's name for him) was born with a severe deformity. He has no lower legs or paws. He is amazingly proficient at moving himself around by utilizing the upper portion of his legs. Other than his locomotion problem, he is in all other respects a normal, healthy, happy, affectionate cat. He actually lived outside until he was discovered by a woman who kept him in a cage for several months where he virtually lived in his litterbox.

When Matt arrived at Kirsten's home, he had no idea that the litterbox was the only designated spot for elimination. By understanding his history and carefully observing his substrate preferences Kirsten has within a week managed to train him to use the litterbox exclusively. She discovered that he did not like to eliminate on the bare linoleum floor however he would occasionally use the sandy substrate in the easy-access litterbox she provided for him. He would also eliminate on anything else that was left on the floor. By temporarily confining him to an area with only the bare floor, his litterbox, bed, food and water, she has successfully conditioned him to use his litterbox reliably. Matt is well on his way toward becoming an adoptable pet.

It is through careful observation that the clues are discovered that reveal the solutions to litterbox avoidance. No one is in a better position to make these discoveries than you, the pet owner. You know your cat's unique personality and behavior patterns better than anyone else because you live with him. Take the time to notice his behavior in and around the litterbox. It will give you an idea of how he feels about his toilet. If he spends as little time as possible in the box--with hardly any digging or scratching in the litter--it could be that the substrate is offensive to him. If he uses the litter, but proceeds to scratch on the floor outside of the box, he may be finding the litterbox too small to accommodate this natural behavior.

Some cats have special needs and deserve extra consideration. For example, particular attention should be given to the unique problems of long-haired cats who may periodically find bits of stool sticking to their fur and may avoid the litterbox for that reason. They may also be disturbed by the fine-grained litter clinging to the tufts of fur on their paws--in which case they might be happier with a different textured substrate. (Trimming the fur in the problem areas may be all that is needed.) Declawed cats may also require special considerations as lingering paw sensitivity may force them to seek out smooth or soft surfaces for elimination purposes.

Whatever the reason for the inconsistent use of the litterbox, with a little work and a little patience, it can be solved!

Summary

Ten Steps to Solving Housesoiling Problems:

1. Have the cat checked by a veterinarian to rule out the possibility that health problems are causing the litterbox avoidance.
2. Make sure that the litterbox situation is ideal--clean, natural, and convenient.
3. Identify possible stressors for the cat.
4. Eliminate the stressor, if possible. Otherwise, systematically desensitize the cat to the anxiety-producing stimulus. Drug therapy may be considered.
5. Thoroughly clean soiled areas with a strong enzymatic cleaner to remove any lingering odor.
6. Place deterrents in the problem areas for at least a month to break the cat's habit of revisiting these spots.
7. If possible place a new litterbox in a location that is near the target area and where it can remain indefinitely.
8. Give the problem cat extra attention on a regular basis by practicing play therapy (interactive play with a fishing pole-type toy).
9. Don't give up! There is always a humane solution for every behavior problem.
10. Talk to your veterinarian for behavioral consultation.