

LITTER BOX PROBLEMS

TREATING & REDUCING CAT INAPPROPRIATE URINATION

Does your cat sometimes or always urinate or defecate outside of the litter box? Inappropriate elimination is one of the most common cat behaviour concerns for guardians. To solve the issue it is very important that you recognize why this is happening, and then you will be able to solve the problem. Dealing with it promptly will make the issue easier to resolve.

Your cat may stop using the litter box for one or a combination of the following reasons:

Medical problems

Behavioural problems

Emotional stress

MEDICAL PROBLEMS

Inappropriate urination may be caused by certain medical conditions. Your cat may have gastrointestinal disease, parasites, bacterial or inflammatory disease, or a nutritional disorder such as malabsorption or food allergies. Older cats may have a condition (e.g. arthritis) that makes it difficult to reach or sit in the litter box. Please have your cat checked by your veterinarian before treating the behavioural or emotional components.

BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEM

1. Dislikes the Litter Box

The signs your cat may show:

- stands on the edge of the litter box to avoid putting paws in the box
- aggressively scratches at the wall or floor but not in the box
- urinates beside the box
- eagerly goes into the box when you have just cleaned it (or perhaps during cleaning)
- digs for 4 seconds or less before eliminating

Reasons for this behaviour:

The litter box:

- is not clean enough
- has a plastic liner
- is too small
- has a top
- has a motor (self-cleaning)

Or your cat:

- associates the box with a painful or frightening incident (e.g. an episode of diarrhea or a loud noise sounded while in the box)
- has been cornered or captured in the box (by a child, another pet, or member of the household)
- does not like the type of litter that is provided or does not like the amount of litter used

2. Dislikes the location of Litter Box

The signs your cat may show:

- completely avoids the location
- runs away from the litter box when you place him in it

Reasons for this behaviour:

The litter box is:

- near a piece of machinery that stops and starts (e.g. water heater, washing machine, dishwasher)
- in a room your cat does not like (e.g. dark basement, busy room)
- in a spot where access is occasionally blocked (e.g. by another pet or member of the household)
- in a corner and your cat prefers open spaces or in an open area and your cat prefers a hidden area
- in an area that is difficult to reach (particularly for older cats or kittens)
- located near a food source

3. Prefers particular scents or textures

The signs your cat may show:

- consistently eliminate on soft surfaces (e.g. bath mats, furniture, carpets)
- consistently eliminate on hard surfaces (e.g. bathtub, hard floor)
- eliminates on dirty laundry, gym bags, plastic bags, or a floor cleaned with an ammonia-based product (to your cat, these items smell like urine).

The reason for this behaviour:

Preference for a texture or scent develops during kitten hood and remains fairly stable throughout the cat's life. Adult cats that are presented with a texture they don't like may try to avoid it when possible.

EMOTIONAL STRESS

Cats can stop using the litter box (and/or spray) when they are feeling anxious or frustrated.

Signs of Anxiety

Your cat:

- hides a lot
- leaves the room when a particular person or pet enters
- comes out only at night
- eats and grooms less than he used to

The reasons:

- a change in your schedule
- something new in the house (e.g. a new couch, paint job, baby or visitor to your home)
- a change in your stress level
- over-stimulation (i.e. too much activity or noise in the home, or people coming in and out)

Signs of Frustration

Your cat:

- follows you around
- meows a lot
- destroys things
- over grooms
- tries to escape
- is moody (i.e. happy one moment and aggressive the next)

The reasons:

- under stimulation (i.e. not enough play, companionship, attention or activity)
- a new cat in the neighbourhood that your cat can see through a window

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

Providing that your cat has received a clean bill of health from your veterinarian, try following the procedures outlined below. Keep in mind your cat may be relieving himself in inappropriate areas for a combination of reasons, so you may have to follow these procedures simultaneously. Be patient, this problem most likely will not be solved instantly. Give you and your cat a few weeks to work it out. Keep in mind, the longer your cat has had the problem, the more difficult it will be to solve.

Clean up the residual urine scents

Once a cat has urinated or defecated in one area, he is likely to go back. You must remove all traces of urine and/or feces with a product specially designed for these stains (i.e. Nature's Miracle, Urine Off). These enzyme-based products don't mask the odors but breakdown the chemical composition of the urine and feces. **Do not use ammonia-based products.** Cats are attracted to the smell and these products will only encourage them to go in the same spot after you've cleaned up. You can use a black light to help find any residual stains.

Use Pheromone Products

When your cat feels safe in an environment, he will rub his head from the side of the chin to the base of the ear, against furniture, the corners of walls or the bottom of curtains. By doing this, your cat is depositing facial pheromones. These invisible markings convey a message of well-being and a feeling of security. Your cat will not eliminate in an area that he has already rubbed.

Feliway® is a product available through your veterinarian that reproduces certain pacifying properties of cat facial pheromones and can greatly aid in resolving elimination problems. There are two forms of the product. A plug-in diffuser that is a 2% concentration and a spray that is more concentrated at 12%.

Generally, a diffuser will help to decrease the general stress that your cat may suffer from. The spray should be used in areas where your cat likes to eliminate. The products should be used together but can be used separately as well. Follow the instructions on the product.

Note: The pheromone products (the diffuser \$100 and the spray \$50) may appear pricey but the positive results are well worth the expense, especially when you consider the costs you may incur replacing your furniture or carpets. For more information on pheromones and how to use them, please visit www.feliway.uk.com.

If you've determined your cat dislikes the litter box:

- Get a new litter box. It should be at least one and half times longer than your cat
- Scoop the litter twice a day and clean it out weekly

Remember: Keep up the cleanliness regiment or the problem will start again.

If you've determined your cat dislikes the location of the litter box:

- Place the litter box as close as you can to the location your cat prefers. After a few days you can start moving it a few inches per day to the location you prefer. Do not move it more than a few inches each day, or your efforts will be wasted. Once you start moving the box, you may need to put food in the old location or cover it with aluminium foil (your cat is less likely to go pee there). You can also spray the pheromones on those spots.
- The location you choose should be:
 - away from food
 - away from noisy machinery
 - in a location your cat prefers (e.g. in an open or hidden area)
- In single cat households, there should be two litter boxes. Some cats like to pee in one and defecate in another.
- For multi-cat households, there should be as many litter boxes as cats, plus one extra.

5 If you have determined your cat prefers a certain texture or scent:

- If your cat prefers hard surfaces, use only a thin layer of litter or just newspaper in the box; or you can also try putting a thin layer of litter on one side and no litter on the other.
- For cats that prefer softer surfaces, use fine, sandy (clumping) litter. Fill the box about 3 to 4 centimeters (1.5 inches) deep.

If you know your cat has emotional problems:

- Observe your cat and try to identify sources of stress and eliminate them as much as possible.
- The pheromone diffuser will also help to reduce overall stress

Always provide positive reinforcement

Pet your cat, give him a treat or engage in a play session every time he uses the litter box. Never punish your cat or scare him for inappropriate elimination. You can interrupt by clapping your hands or throwing a small object on the floor to startle him but only if you can catch him during the first few seconds of elimination.