



Caring Hands Humane Society

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Litter Box Problems?

Understanding cat behavior is a tricky thing but it can be done

One-third of all litter box problems are caused by medical conditions which can only be resolved by seeing a veterinarian, so the first step is to take your cat to a veterinarian. This will rule out bladder or urinary tract infections. If your cat is not spayed or neutered it may be as simple as having this done, once the hormones decrease, the urge to mark will also.

Finally make sure your cat is not stressed. Changes in household routine or patterns in your life may stress out the cat and cause litter box problems. Get the cat back to his/her normal routine or find a quiet place for the cat until the source of the stress passes. Keep in mind that cats do not avoid the litter box to “punish” you or because they are “mad” at you. If stress is the cause of your cat’s litter box problem, he or she is feeling worse than you are and is simply reacting to the pressure of the situation. Getting angry will only make things worse.

Once you rule out these possibilities, the rest is a process of elimination

- **Size matters.** The bigger the better, cats like to be comfortable. The litter box should be roomy with low sides so that getting in and out is easy.
- **A bit of privacy please.** Like the rest of us, cats like to be left alone. A cover might be just the thing for some cats and yet not for others. You need to learn what your cat likes. At the same time, you need to put the litter box in a private place, but one that is easily accessible.
- **Keep it clean.** Change the litter frequently keeping it deep, scoop every day and periodically wash the box out with water and soap (no ammonia!). No one likes a dirty bathroom. If you can smell the litter box when standing nearby, it smells much worse to the cat that is mere inches away. Adding a scoop of baking soda to the freshly scooped or changed litter can also help eliminate odors.
- **Sharing.** Some cats will share their litter box, others won’t. A good rule is one litter box per cat. But the more cats, the more you have to keep clean.

- **Location, location, location.** While privacy is a must don't make getting to the litter box an obstacle course. If your cat, and your family, spend most of their time downstairs, a litter box two stories up is definitely going to be private, but the distance is a recipe for problems. Find a balance. And never put the litter box near a roaring washing machine or hissing radiators.
- **Routine.** This is probably the second biggest reason cats stop using the litter box. Did you just change the type of litter? Did you just move the litter box? Has a new cat joined the household?
- **Mine!** Did a cat you used to live with pee in one spot? Is your new cat now doing it? Your cat may be trying to tell that old cat that this house is his. Clean it thoroughly with bleach or enzymatic cleaners or better yet, put the cat's litter box there. He is, after all, trying to tell you something.
- **Be creative!** Some declawed cats develop an aversion to the feeling of litter on their sensitive paws. Other cats may develop a strong preference for urinating on soft things like blankets or laundry. If you cannot find a commercial litter to please such a cat, what often works is putting folded newspaper or a folded rag in the litter box instead. These can be thrown away or in the case of rags, washed daily.

Finally, if—and only if—all these steps fail, it is time for “reprogramming” the cat.

Isolate the cat to one room with the litter box and do not let him out until he uses it faithfully. Once he does, let him venture out for small periods at a time, always within easy reach of the litter box. As long as he keeps using it, pretty soon he can once again have the run of the house. (This won't work if the problem is actually one of the issues discussed above, so make sure you go through all the previous steps first.)

Always keep a positive, compassionate attitude. Anger will only stress the cat and cause further problems. Working through each step of the problem takes patience. But once you resolve the issue you and your cat can stop thinking about litter boxes and go back to being best friends.

CHHS Staff