



My Cat Will Not Use Its Litterbox. What Do I Do?

Litterbox issues are often a primary concern for cat owners. This document will help guide you through the process of determining the cause of your cat's litterbox problems and will give you tips on how to solve those problems. Cat elimination problems are frustrating for cat owners. When trying to figure out the cause of your cat's elimination problems, it is important to keep in mind that cats do not eliminate outside of the litterbox just to spite their owner or because they are angry. Because humans act for these reasons, it's easy for us to assume that our pets do as well. Animals don't act out of spite or revenge, so it won't help to give your cat special privileges in the hope that she or he will start using the litter box again.

Go to the vet:

Before doing anything else, it is important to have your cat examined by a veterinarian. Your cat may have an undiagnosed medical problem which may be causing him or her to use the litter box inconsistently. Cats can often hide the symptoms of an illness, so even if your cat "seems" healthy, please consult with your veterinarian to rule out any medical problems.

How big is your cat?

This applies to the size of the box that you choose, as well as the choice to use a hooded box or not. A cat needs to feel a sense of space in his place. The cat needs room to turn around, to cover what they've eliminated, or to choose one corner over another. Often, if they feel their bodies hitting the sides of the box (especially bigger or long-haired cats), they will simply choose a place that affords them more "elbow room", and that usually means a place that we consider inappropriate.

A hooded litterbox?

If you have a small box with a hood for a large cat, he will have two alarms that will sound upon entrance and exit from this confined area. First, the whiskers are designed to detect whether there's enough room for the cat. If the whiskers brush against the opening, they send a message that the rest of the cat probably won't fit either. Second, the cat's side(s) touching the hood sends that same message. Cats prefer space to "privacy". Outside, a cat doesn't look for a "private" place to eliminate. Quite the opposite! It's really us who would rather see them eliminate inside something that leaves them sight (and scent) unseen. There's also an inter-cat aspect of the hood that can come into play. If there are hierarchical problems in the house, one place where conflicts take place most often is around a hooded box. With no sightlines and no escape route, the cat in the box is completely at the mercy of another who wishes to

ambush. If an ambush occurs, as with all of the possible reasons we're outlining here, the result is a negative association with the box itself. If a hooded litterbox is a potential issue in your household, it would be in the cat's best interest to remove the hood.

Whether or not to use silver liners?

Liners are a luxury for the owner, but may not be so for the cat. It is easy for cat owners to clean a soiled litterbox when all that has to be touched is the liner and not the litter. While this is convenient for the cat owner, there can be unanticipated drawbacks. There are two primary drawbacks, one obvious and one not so obvious. The obvious "snag" is that different cats like to paw at or bury their litter at different depths and with different intensity. If their claws get hooked on the bag, whether side or bottom, once again we're dealing with a negative box association that could lead to non-use. When following a system of rule-outs, or the detective work that goes into each of our consultations, we always look for leaky liners as a possible cause. The second reason liners may not be too friendly is that they do carry a bit of a static-electric charge to them. It's not much, but again, most especially in the cases of larger and/or long haired cats, the combination of coming into contact with the hood and the liner can give them just enough of a zap, going both in and out of the box, that it is equivalent to punishment to even attempt entry! If you were in their paws, you'd keep out, too!

Still having problems? Read on for additional things to consider...

There can be as many reasons a cat chooses not to use a litterbox as there are cats. Each cat is an individual with his or her own set of reasons why he or she would send up a red flag in the form of inappropriate elimination.

In this section, we focus on the substrate--the elimination surface--the litter itself. Although surface preferences usually develop early in life, cats can change suddenly later for reasons we don't always fully understand. We can only try to cater to these preferences, often by trial and error. The following factors are based on a mixture of scientific studies and anecdotal observations by behavior consultants.

Types of litter

The choices seem limitless: clay, scoopable, newspaper, corn-based, wheat-based, granules, pearls, crystals, scented, non-scented. Most cats prefer a soft litter since the majority of substrate preference problems we see are for soft surfaces like bath mats, bedding, and clothing. This may mean that a change from regular clay litter, pellets, or 'crystals' to a sandier, scoopable litter is in order. Cats who are used to eliminating outdoors and are in the process of being retrained to an indoor litterbox might even prefer garden dirt or potting soil. One caution: clay and scoopable litters are dusty, and may contribute to asthma or other respiratory problems. Corn and wheat-based litters, or pelleted types, are the least dusty.

Depth of litter

From experience and the expertise of other behaviorists and knowledgeable guardians who have been down the path of trial and error, cats prefer the "less is more" philosophy when filling their box. Add enough so that they can cover and dig, but not enough so that their paws actually sink in into the substrate. One to two inches of litter is plenty. Kittens may even need the litter to be shallower. More litter does not equal a less smelly litter. If you live with multiple cats especially, you know what a large fallacy that one is. The ammonia odor in cat urine, despite the best marketing campaign of the litter manufacturer, is strong!

Older cats may have issues with pain that impact their use of the litterbox. A recent study found that 90% of cats over 12 years of age had signs of arthritis that were visible on radiographs (x-rays), many of them severe. Less litter provides a more stable surface that may be more comfortable for those creaky old joints.

How often do you scoop and clean the litterbox?

If you've chosen a scoopable litter, it is important to remove waste daily. Even with non-clumping litter, cats like the feeling of picking their own spot, circling it, digging a shallow space for it, and burying it—we want to leave plenty of room.

Strange as it may seem, we can actually overdo cleaning the box. We often claim in the name of fastidiousness, that boxes need to be spotless daily. That may not be true. For some cats, the comforting presence of their own scent is important in maintaining good litterbox habits. However, if your cat is having box problems and you're not cleaning the box regularly, a thorough cleaning is the first order of business.

There is also a difference between necessary removing of waste daily, and cleaning the box. In general, litterboxes do not need a deep cleaning (dumping all the litter and washing the box) more than once every three or four weeks. Hot water and soap are adequate for cleaning. Stay away from heavy-duty cleansers like Pine-Sol, Lysol, or ammonia, as their strong odors may actually cause aversion to the litterbox.

What to use: Scented or Non-scented litter?

Non-scented is best, especially if there is a lid on the box. Remember what the cat has to deal with in those close confines. If your cat is having litterbox problems, don't add another complication by adding a scented litter. Many cats seem to dislike the strong perfume of some litters.

Making the switch

Cats need a daily routine. If we've decided that a surface preference is a component of their elimination problem, it may only make the problem worse if we abruptly change litter types. The best plan of action is to be patient, and introduce no more than a half a cup per day of the new substrate in the litterbox until the switch is complete. Be sure to note if the problem is worsening. If it is, just back up to the previous content, and leave

it be for two days. It may take a couple of weeks to change over. This may seem like a long time, but the effort is well worth it!

If you Have a Multiple-Cat Household, Your Cat May be Having Litterbox Issues Related to Inter-Cat Aggression

Aggression can develop between long-time companions, but is more common after a new cat is brought into the family. You might notice increased tussling or even fighting. This can be manifested as cats moving more warily around the house, growling or hissing, acting "on guard", or being more easily startled. It's not hard to spot signs of aggression, whether full-blown or more subtle. But there is an obvious problem that may also occur: refusal to use the litterbox by one or more of the cats.

It's important to recall that litterbox problems with cats who don't get along are a product of the aggression. If your cats are not getting along, please contact our animal behavior department for suggestions on how to remedy that specific problem. Regardless, it is important that cats never feel "cornered" in the litterbox by another animal. Otherwise, cats can form a negative association with the box. If they do, they are less likely to use the box. The first step to prevent a cat from feeling cornered is to remove the lid from a hooded litterbox.

The second step is to put the litterboxes in easily accessible areas. This may be a temporary move as the cats sort out their differences, but squishing a litterbox between the washer and dryer or in a closet creates the same sort of poor-visibility situation as a hooded box. The cats must be able to see what's around them in order for the litterbox to be an acceptable place to eliminate. Eventually you may be able to move the box to a more convenient location.

The final essential step is to add more litterboxes! The tried and true formula, "one box per cat plus one", works very well. For example, in a two-cat household, you should have three litterboxes. Take caution to not to put all the litterboxes in one place. The goal is to give cats an expanded sense of territory, which is accomplished by spreading their scent. We must sometimes put boxes where our cats need them, even though they may not be the most desirable spots from our human point of view. If it helps keep the peace--and keep everything inside the box--it's definitely worth it! Taking steps early to diffuse the aggression will promote harmony in household and prevent problems from developing.

Sources for this document include The Denver Dumb Friends League and Little Big Cat