

Solving Litter Box Issues

It is not uncommon for cats to have the occasional accident outside of their litter box – this typically happens due to not cleaning/scooping the box often enough. If the problem persists, here are the steps to take to solve your cat's litter box issues.

1. You should **always** check to see if your cat is eliminating inappropriately due to a medical condition – make sure to think about the following:
 - a. Is your cat spayed/neutered? Intact cats are far more likely to spray or use urine to mark their territory – spay/neuter can resolve this issue completely
 - b. If your cat is spayed/neutered already – make an appointment to see your Vet!
 - i. You should ask your Vet for an exam, urinalysis, and bloodwork to check if your cat is suffering from a medical condition – medication may be all you need to get your cat back on track!
 1. A urinalysis can help determine if your cat has a urinary tract infection, bladder or kidney stones, blockage, etc. – all can result in litter box issues
 2. Bloodwork can help determine if your cat has hyperthyroidism or diabetes – these can also result in litter box issues
2. If your cat is healthy & all tests come back normal – the next thing to look at is your cat's litter box. The following is preferred by *most* cats in regards to litter box placement, quantity, type, cleaning, and litter type:
 - a. the litter box should be **uncovered** & 1.5 times the length of the cat – from the tip of their nose to the base of their tail
 - b. the litter box should be scooped daily, the litter dumped & replaced bi-weekly, and completely washed out monthly
 - i. Avoid washing the box with detergents because the smell may repel the cat. Warm water is just fine!
 - c. litter is unscented & clumping
 - d. **there are as many boxes as there are cats + 1**
 - e. litter boxes are placed in *ideal areas* of the home for your cat:
 - i. accessible, but low traffic areas (for example - not in a basement with a washing machine that makes scary noises)
 - ii. not near their food, water, or favorite sleeping spots
 - iii. not in a “cornered” area – cats should have multiple exit points
 - iv. in different places in the house, making them even more accessible in various areas – such as 1 per floor
3. If all of the above has been tried & is not solving your cat's litter box issue – it can be caused by stress, anxiety, fear, and/or insecurity of their perceived territory. To help determine the root cause, you should think about the following:
 - a. **When did the issues begin? Was there a change in the household? Was there a traumatic incident?**
 - i. Cats are very habitual animals – so any changes in the household can be very stressful for a cat
 1. If a new person has come into the home – this can definitely cause litter box issues, its important that your cat is *introduced slowly and at their own pace*

- a. Let the cat come to the new person, and don't force the kitty to be sociable. It can also help if the new person starts feeding the cat or playing with the cat using a favorite toy.
2. If you've moved to a new house/apartment - temporarily confine the cat to a room by them self with food, water and a litter box. Let them get adjusted to that smaller space, then after a few days, open the door and allow the cat to explore at their own pace.
- ii. Cats can learn to fear the area where the box is located – such as if there is a loud noise near the box (such as a washing machine), a toddler/other pet interrupting them as they are using the box, scolding your cat near the box. All can cause the cat to avoid the area.
 1. If this is the case – it's important to create a *new positive experience* for your cat. This involves moving the litter box to a new area where they won't be interrupted & have multiple exit points.
- b. How often does your cat have accidents & where does he/she have accidents?**
 - i. You should think about whether there's a pattern to when your cat is having accidents & where
 1. If your cat is using the same area – you should either make that area unavailable to your cat *or* move the litter box to that area
 2. If your cat is having an accident right by the box – *it likely means there is something about the box they do not like*
 - a. This can happen if the box is covered – we recommend uncovered litter boxes
 - b. This can happen if the sides are too high & your cat is elderly, they may need lower sides
 - c. Alternatively – it can also happen because your cat is simply missing the box, we recommend higher sides or even a storage bin with a cut out for your cat to go inside (lid off, of course!)
 3. If your cat is having accidents when you're gone for a long time – this is a result of separation anxiety
 - a. This can also happen immediately after you return
 - b. You may notice that your cat is eliminating on your bedding, clothes, shoes, etc.
 - i. Cats usually choose these because their owners' scent lingers on them – this means that you are so important to your cat that they feel anxious when you're gone!
 - ii. We recommend using synthetic pheromones, such as Feliway, to help calm your cat
 - iii. Interactive toys can also help keep a cat mentally and physically occupied during your absence – see "Enrichment & Playtime with My Cat" for more information about this

- iv. If the problem persists, you may want to talk to your Vet about possible drug therapy
- c. **Does he/she pee on a vertical or horizontal surface?**
 - i. If your cat is peeing on a vertical surface – they are likely spraying, which is a communicative behavior cats use when feeling insecure within their perceived territory
 - 1. This tends to happen due to animals outside – either stray cats/wild animals, see below for more information about that
 - 2. You can also extend a cat's perceived territory in a few ways:
 - a. Add cat trees, high shelving, condos and hideaways in the home – all should include multiple access points and exits to prevent a cat from ever feeling trapped
 - b. Install an outdoor cattery to enlarge your cats' living area
 - i. They can be large open enclosures with shelves and cubbies where cats can relax and play (and you can relax and play with them), small covered enclosures just big enough for a litter box, or something in between
 - c. Leash train your cat & take him/her on walks! Regularly walking a cat can also help by expanding his perceived territory - this could move the marking behavior outside, at the new periphery of his territory, rather than inside.
- d. **Are there other pets or children in the home? How is your cat's relationship with them?**
 - i. It's not uncommon for cats to refuse to use a box that another cat has used - *you should always have more litter boxes than cats* to increase the likelihood there is a clean box somewhere
 - 1. If you have multiple cats and you aren't sure which cat is having the accidents – confine your cats, one at a time, to determine which one is soiling
 - ii. Sometimes an elimination problem can develop as a result of conflict between cats in the home - if one cat is harassing and intimidating another, the victim may be too afraid to go near the box
 - 1. This intimidation may not be seen as aggressive, but rather playful – this can still result in litter box issues if the other cat is not a fan of the play style
 - 2. For more information – see our article, "Helping Cats to Get Along"
 - iii. A problem can also develop if there is a dog in the home that's chasing your cat - see our article, "Preventing Your Dog from Chasing the Cat"
 - 1. Your cat's food, water, and litter box should all be in areas the dog does not have access to – using a baby gate to seclude the area is advised!
 - iv. Relationships between children & cats can be a wonderful thing! But, sometimes children can be a little too much for our feline friends – so *it's important there are boundaries*. If the relationship between a child

& a cat is not great – it can cause litter box issues. To learn more about how to mend fences – see our article, “[Children and Cats: Important Information for Parents](#)”

e. **Are there stray or wild animals nearby?**

- i. Territory insecurity can cause a cat to have litter box issues. This most often occurs due to stray or feral cats or wild animals (e.g., raccoons, coyotes, skunks, etc.) in or near the home. Even if a cat is strictly indoors, they will likely be able to see, hear or smell these perceived invaders even when you cannot.

1. *The most important factor in solving this is to remove or dissuade unwelcome animals from entering the territory.* Do you leave cat food out for strays? Are trashcans in close proximity to your house that a wild animal could potentially get into? Here's a link about how to deter outdoor animals from coming near your house - <http://www.havahart.com/how-to-repel-feral-cats>

Regardless of why your cat may be eliminating inappropriately - make sure you clean soiled areas thoroughly with an enzymatic cleanser designed to neutralize the odor (such as Nature’s Miracle)!

Source: *Animal Behavior College*