



Preventing Litterbox Problems

An Educated Mouth

Most cats have a specific preference about where they want to eliminate. By following the suggestions outlined below, your cat can be started off on the right paw.

Location

Most individuals are inclined to place the litter box in an out-of-the-way spot in order to minimize odor and loose particles of cat litter in the house. Often, the litter box ends up in the basement, sometimes next to an appliance and/or on a cold cement floor. This type of location can be most undesirable from your cat's point of view for several reasons.

If your cat is a kitten or older cat, they may not be able to get down a long flight of stairs in time to get to the litter box. Since they are new to the household, your cat may not remember where the litter box is, especially if it's located in an area they seldom frequent. Your cat may be startled while using the litter box if a furnace, washer or dryer suddenly turns on and that may be the last time they'll risk such a frightening experience. Also, if your cat likes to scratch the surface surrounding their litter box, they may find the cold cement floor unappealing.

There must be a compromise. The litter box should be kept in a location which affords your cat some privacy, but is also conveniently located. If the litter box is placed in a closet or bathroom, be sure the door is wedged open from both sides, in order to prevent your cat from being trapped inside or out. Depending on where it's located, consider cutting a hole in a closet door and adding a swinging door. If the litter box sits on a smooth, slick or cold surface, place a small throw rug underneath the litter box.

Type of Litter

Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained litters, presumably because they have a softer feel. The new scoop-able litters usually have finer grains than the typical clay litter. However, high-quality, dust free clay litters are relatively small-grained and may be perfectly acceptable to your cat. Potting soil also has a very soft texture, but is not very absorbent. If your cat has a history of spending time outdoors and is likely to eliminate in houseplants, try mixing potting soil with their regular litter. Pellet-type litters or those made from citrus peels are not recommended. Once a litter is discovered that your cat enjoys, don't change types or brands. Buying the least expensive litter or whatever brand happens to be on sale, could result in your cat not using their litter box.

Many cats are put off by the odor of scented or deodorant litters. For the same reason, it's not a good idea to place a room deodorizer or air freshener near the litter box. A thin layer of baking soda placed

Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation

Walnut Creek, CA • (925) 256-1273 • (800) 567-1273 • arlife.org/resource-and-referral-center



on the bottom of the box will help absorb odors without repelling your cat. Odor shouldn't be a problem if the litter box is kept clean. If the litter box odor is offensive, your cat probably finds it even more offensive and won't want to eliminate in it.

Number of Litter Boxes

There should be at least one more litter box than cats in the household. That way, none of the cats will ever be prevented from eliminating in the litter box because it's already occupied. Consider placing the litter boxes in several locations around the house, so that your cat can't guard the litter box area from other house cats. It is recommended that at least one litter box be placed on each level of the house. It's not possible to designate a personal litter box for each cat in the household, as cats will use any litter box that's available. Occasionally, your cat may refuse to use the litter box after another cat has used it. In this case, all of the litter boxes will need to be kept extremely clean and additional boxes may be needed.

To Cover or Not to Cover

Some individuals prefer to use a covered litter box. However, there are some potential problems with using this type of box. Experiment by offering both types at first, to discover which litter box your cat prefers.

Potential Problems with a Covered Litter Box

- Forgetting to clean the litter box because the dirty litter is out of sight - out of mind.
- A covered litter box traps odors inside, so it will need to be cleaned more often than an open one litter box.
- A covered litter box may not allow a large cat sufficient room to turn around, scratch, dig or position themselves in the way they want.
- A covered litter box may also make it easier for your cat to lay in wait and ambush the user as they exit the box.
- On the other hand, a covered litter box may feel more private and may be preferred by timid cats.

Cleaning the Litter Box

To meet the needs of the most discriminating cat, feces should be scooped out of the litter box daily. How often the litter is changed depends on the number of cats in the house, the number of litter boxes, and the type of litter being used. Twice a week is a general guideline for clay litter. Depending on the circumstances though, the box may need to be changed every other day or once a week. If the litter is scooped daily, scoop-able litter can go two to three weeks before the litter needs to be

Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation

Walnut Creek, CA • (925) 256-1273 • (800) 567-1273 • arlife.org/resource-and-referral-center



changed. If an odor is noticed or if much of the litter is wet or clumped, it's time for a change. Don't use strong smelling chemicals or cleaning products when washing the litter box, as it may cause your cat to avoid it altogether. Washing with soap and water should be sufficient.

Litter Box Liners

Some cats don't mind having a liner in the litter box, while others do. Again, experiment to see if your cat is bothered by a liner in the box. If using a liner, make sure it's anchored in place, so it can't easily catch your cat's claws or be pulled out of place.

Depth of Litter

Some individuals believe the more litter in the box, the less often it needed to be cleaned. Not true. Most cats won't use litter that's more than about two inches deep. In fact, some long-haired cats actually prefer less litter and a smooth, slick surface, such as the bottom of the litter box. The litter box needs to be cleaned on a regular basis and adding extra litter is not a way around that chore.

Litter Training Cats

There's really no such thing as litter-training your cat in the same way one would houstrain a dog. Your cat doesn't need to be taught what to do with the litter box. The only thing needed is to provide an acceptable, accessible litter box using the suggestions above. It's not recommended or even necessary to take your cat to the litter box and move their paws back and forth in the litter. This may actually be an unpleasant experience for your cat and is likely to initiate a negative association with the litter box.

If Problems Develop

If your cat begins to eliminate in areas other than the litter box, the first call should be to a veterinarian. Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cat's litter box habits. If the veterinarian determines your cat is healthy, the cause may be behavioral. Most litter box behavior problems can be resolved by using behavior modification techniques. Punishment is not the answer. For long-standing or complex situations, contact an animal behavior specialist who has experience working with cats.

Medical Problems

It's common for cats to begin eliminating outside of their litter box when they have a medical problem. For example, if your cat has a urinary tract infection or crystals in their urine it can make urination very painful. Your cat might associate this pain with the litter box and begin to avoid it. If your cat has a house-soiling problem, check with a veterinarian first to rule out any medical problems for the

Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation

Walnut Creek, CA • (925) 256-1273 • (800) 567-1273 • arlife.org/resource-and-referral-center



behavior. Cats don't always act sick even when they are, and only a trip to the veterinarian for a thorough physical examination can rule out a medical problem.

Cleaning Soiled Areas

Because animals are highly motivated to continue soiling an area that smells like urine or feces, it's imperative to thoroughly clean the soiled areas.

Aversion to the Litter Box

Your cat may have decided the litter box is an unpleasant place to eliminate if:

- The box is not clean enough for them
- Your cat has experienced painful urination or defecation in the box due to a medical problem
- Your cat has been startled by a noise while using the box
- Your cat has been ambushed while in the box either by another cat, person, or dog
- Your cat might associate the litter box with punishment if someone once punished them for eliminating outside the litter box and then placed them in the litter box

What to Do

- Keep litter boxes extremely clean. Scoop at least once a day and change the litter completely every four to five days. If using scoop-able litter, the need to change the litter may not be as frequent. This will vary according to how many cats are in the household, the quantity of litter boxes, and how large the cats are that are using the box or boxes. A good guideline is that if the litter box smells, then it's sure to be offensive to your cat as well.
- Add a new box in a different location than the old one and use a different type of litter in the new box. Because your cat has decided that their old litter box is unpleasant, make the new one different enough so that they don't simply apply the old, negative associations to the new box
- Make sure the litter box isn't near an appliance that makes noise or in an area of the house that your cat doesn't frequent
- If ambushing is a problem, try to create more than one exit from the litter box, so that if the ambusher is waiting by one area, your cat always has an escape route.

Surface Preferences

All animals develop preferences for a particular surface on which they like to eliminate. These preferences may be established early in life, but they may also change overnight for reasons unknown. Your cat may have a surface preference if:

Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation

Walnut Creek, CA • (925) 256-1273 • (800) 567-1273 • arlife.org/resource-and-referral-center



- She consistently eliminates on a particular texture. For example, soft-textured surfaces, such as carpet, bedding or clothing, or slick-textured surfaces, such as tile, cement, bathtubs or sinks.
- She frequently scratches on this same texture after elimination, even if they eliminate in the litter box.
- She is or was previously an outdoor cat and prefers to eliminate on grass or soil.

What to Do

- If your cat is eliminating on soft surfaces, try using a high quality, scoop-able litter, and put a soft rug under the litter box.
- If your cat is eliminating on slick, smooth surfaces, try putting just a very thin layer of litter at one end of the box, leaving the other end bare, and put the box on a hard floor.
- If your cat has a history of being outdoors, add some soil or sod to the litter box.
- Make the area where they have been eliminating aversive to your cat by covering it with an upside down carpet runner or aluminum foil, or by placing citrus-scented cotton balls over the area.

Location Preferences

Your cat may have a location preference if:

- She always eliminates in quiet, protected places, such as under a desk downstairs or in a closet.
- She eliminates in an area where the litter box was previously kept or where there are urine odors.
- She eliminates on a different level of the house from where the litter box is located.

What to Do

- Put at least one litter box on every level of the house.
- Make the area where your cat been eliminating aversive to them by covering it with upside down carpet runner or aluminum foil, or by placing citrus-scented cotton balls over the area
- Put a litter box in the location where your cat has been eliminating. When they have consistently used this box for at least one month, gradually move it to a more convenient location at a rate of an inch per day.

Oops!

If your cat is caught in the act of eliminating in the house, do something to interrupt them and but be careful not to scare them. Immediately take them to where the litter box is located and set them on the floor. If they wander over to the litter box, wait and praise them after they eliminate in the box. If they



take off in another direction, they may want privacy. Watch from afar until they go back to the litter box and eliminates, then praise them when they do.

Don't ever punish your cat for eliminating outside of the litter box. If a soiled area is found, it's too late to administer a correction. Do nothing but clean it up. Rubbing your cat's nose in it, taking them to the spot and scolding them, or any other type of punishment, will only make your cat afraid of eliminating. Animals don't understand punishment after the fact, even if it's only seconds later. Punishment will do more harm than good.

Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation

Walnut Creek, CA • (925) 256-1273 • (800) 567-1273 • arlife.org/resource-and-referral-center