



# Litter Box Problem Solving

Although cats' instinct is to use litter boxes appropriately, sometimes social, environmental, and medical problems can interfere with that. This handout does not cover every possible solution, but our hope is that it will provide some foundational ideas that will allow you to brainstorm the needs of your specific cat.



## Rule out medical causes:

The first thing to consider is if your cat's inappropriate elimination is related to a medical issue. Pain during urination can cause cats to have negative associations with their litter box, and the longer it goes untreated, the harder it will be to rebuild that association to something positive. If your cat is peeing outside of the litter box, talk to your veterinarian about getting a urinalysis.

Once you've eliminated possible medical causes, you can start to explore the social and environmental reasons. There are any number of stressors that might cause this behavior in your kitty, but below are common stressors to consider.

## The litterbox isn't cleaned to their liking:

The easiest way to control litter box odor is to clean it every day. While it might be appreciated by the human family, using scented litter or adding a scented additive to improve the smell of the litter box disrupts the cat's sense of ownership over the space. We also recommend against using plug-in air fresheners right by the litter box for the same reason.

### Most cat prefer a low-dust, unscented, clumping litter. Why?

- Clumping litter is made of smaller pieces that are less likely to get stuck in cats' paws and irritate them.
- Cats' sense of smell is **14x stronger** than humans'! So something that smells just a little bit to us can be overpowering to them.
- Cats like to dig into their litterbox to bury the clumps and poop, and a dusty litter makes this a sandstorm. Not fun for our kitties.

Spot cleaning your cat's litter box every day and fully changing out the litter at least every week will help keep the smell down. If you absolutely must use something to combat the smell, try a thin layer of baking soda at the bottom of the box.

## Conflicts with people or other pets in the house:

A key component to understanding why your cat is eliminating inappropriately is to understand what the litter box means to the cat. It's not just a toilet; it's a central aspect of their territory. A common reason for cats to be urinating outside of the litter box is that they are feeling insecure or unsafe about their territory.

If your cat is getting interrupted while they are trying to use the litter box, or if their social standing in the house is threatened by one of their roommates (toddling, furry, or otherwise), they may react by peeing outside of their litter box, either in more socially important areas, or areas where they'll be able to escape from conflict. The solution here depends a bit on the setup in your home, but a couple of things to note:

- Even though a litter box might not be the most interior-design friendly thing in your home, neither is inappropriate elimination. It is important that the litter box be in a place that feels accessible to your cat and/or like a center of its territory.
- For some cats, privacy is less important to a cat than safety, and if a cat feels like it can get cornered in its litter box, it may be less likely to use it. Covered litter boxes can be particularly troubling to insecure cats, so try uncovered boxes, and make sure there are few ways for your cat to escape from the litter box area.
- The general rule for litter boxes is that you should have one for every cat in the home, plus one. Two cats? Three litter boxes. Five cats? Six litter boxes. This will help reduce conflict.
- Give your cat options in terms of location – clumping the litter boxes together can increase the potential for conflicts if you have multiple cats.
- If the litter box is next to something that could unexpectedly make noise and startle them (hot water heater, washers or dryers, etc.) they could learn negative associations with the litterbox. Be mindful of what is around and make sure that wherever their litter box is, your cat feels safe.
- Keep their litter away from their food and water. For the same reasons we find it gross to eat a sandwich in the bathroom, a cat's instinct is to avoid eliminating where they eat.

#### **Your cat has a litter or box preference, and their current set-up is not it:**

There are a ton of options for litter and boxes out there, and every cat and every person has their preference. Self-cleaning boxes might be great for you, but the automation might stress out your cat. Covered litter boxes might be your preference, but it might make your cat feel unsafe. If a litter's particles are too big, they might get stuck in your cat's paws and cause irritation. We recommend getting a few options and seeing what your cat likes.

#### **They're upset:**

Like any behavior issue, litter box problems can be a reaction to something. Has someone recently moved into or out of your space? Did you move? Give birth? Add a pet? If you can do some detective work around what happened right before you started noticing litter box issues, you can work to rebuild your cat's sense of comfort and safety. It might take some time for your cat to adjust to a new normal, but positive reinforcement training and changing how you manage the environment can help them get comfortable.