

The Litterbox

Location

People often want to put the litterbox somewhere out of the way, like the basement, to minimize the odor and keep the rest of the house less messy. However, that can lead to the new cat not remembering where the box is or not wanting to go next to an appliance or on a cold cement floor. A compromise must be made. The box should be in a place where your cat gets some privacy, but is also conveniently located. If the litterbox is in a closet or bedroom, make sure the door is wedged open from both sides to make sure the cat doesn't get locked in or out. Depending on the location, you could even cut a hole in the closet door or add a swinging door. If the litterbox is on a smooth, slick, or cold surface, put a small rug underneath. If you have a multilevel home, you should have a box on each level of the house.

Type of Litter

Research shows that most cats prefer fine-grained litters because they are softer. There are many different options that are fine-grained. Once you find a litter your cat likes, don't change types or brands. Changing it suddenly could result in your cat not using the box.

Many cats don't like scented litters so picking an unscented litter is a good choice. For the same reason, it's not a good idea to have an air freshener near the litterbox. The scents are for people, not cats. Keeping the box clean and adding a thin layer of baking soda on the bottom of the box will help with any odor.

Number of Litterboxes

You should have at least as many litterboxes as you have cats plus one. It is recommended to have two for your first cat plus an additional for every other cat in the house. This will prevent your cats from not using the litterbox because it's already occupied. It can also be a good idea to have the litterboxes in several locations and on each level of the house so that no cat can guard the litterbox area and prevent others from using it.

Types of Litterboxes

There are a variety of litterboxes to choose from and it may take some time to find the perfect one for your cat. The best box size is about 2' x 3'. Keep in mind a small box for a kitten will need to be switched for a bigger box. Your cat should be able to turn around comfortably and have room to dig. Some boxes are covered and some aren't. While most people would prefer a covered one, there can be some issues that come from it. With a covered box, you may forget to clean it, it traps the odors inside so you actually have to clean it more often, and it may not be big enough for your cat to move around in. That being said, a covered litterbox can provide more privacy, which is especially helpful for timid cats.



Cleaning the Box

The litterbox should be cleaned daily. How often you need to change the litter depends on the number of cats, number of litterboxes, and type of litter you use. Twice a week is a general guideline for clay litter, but depending on the circumstances, it may need to be changed more often. Scoopable litter can go for about one week before needing to be changed. If there is an odor or much of the litter is wet or clumped, it should be changed. Don't wash the litterbox with strong smelling chemicals or cleaning products since this can make your cat not want to use it. Soap and water works just fine.

Liners

Some cats don't mind having a liner in their litterbox, but others do. It may take some experimentation to see if your cat is okay with the liner or not. If you do use a liner, make sure its anchored in place so it doesn't get caught by your cat's claws and moved around.

Depth of Litter

Most cats won't use litter that's more than about three inches deep. Some long-haired cats actually prefer less litter and a smooth, slick surface, such as the bottom of the litterbox. The litterbox needs to be cleaned regularly and adding more litter doesn't change that.

"Litter-training Cats"

You don't really "litter-train" your cat like you house-train a dog. A cat doesn't need to be taught to use the litterbox as long as it's in an acceptable, accessible place and follows the suggestions above. All you should need to do is show your new cat all of the locations of the boxes. Trying to train your cat to do anything in the litterbox can actually cause a negative association with the litterbox.

Solving Litterbox Problems

Location

There are a variety of reasons why cats may go outside the litterbox. Sometimes, the reason the litterbox problem initially started is not the same reason it is continuing. For example, if your cat stops using the box while its sick, it could develop a preference for a different surface or location in your house. Cats don't stop using the litterbox because they are mad or upset with us. By carefully observing your cat and its environment, you can identify the problems and change them so your cat uses the litterbox

Medical Problems

It's common for cats to not use their litterbox when they have a medical problem. For example, a urinary tract infection can be very painful. The cat associates the pain with the litterbox and begins to avoid it. If your cat is having a house-soiling problem, check with your veterinarian first to rule out any medical problems for the behavior. Cats don't always act sick so this change in behavior can help you find a medical problem.

Anxiety

When a cat is feeling stressed or anxious they sometimes will not use their litterbox. Some causes of anxiety are things like a new baby, a new pet, moving, conflict between animals in the home, or a roaming cat sitting outside the window.

If your cat isn't using the litterbox in response to a new resident in your home, have them make friends with your cat by feeding, grooming, and playing with your cat. Make your cat have a positive association with this new person. Resolve conflicts between animals in your home, and restrict your cat's access to doors and windows where they can see animals outside. If this isn't possible, discourage the presence of other animals near your house. Reduce your cat's stress with stress reducing techniques and play therapy.

Aversion to the Litterbox

Your cat may have decided that the litterbox is an unpleasant place because: the box isn't clean enough, they have experienced a painful medical problem, they have been startled by a noise while using the box, they have been ambushed by another cat, dog, or you in the box, or they associate the litterbox with punishment (they were punished for going outside the box and then placed inside).

Keep the litterbox clean. Scoop at least once a day and change the litter once a week. You can also add a new box in a different location that is not near any appliances and is easily accessible with a new type of litter. This will allow your cat to form a new, positive association with a litterbox. If ambushing is a problem, get a litterbox with more than one exit.



Surface Preferences

All animals develop preferences for a certain surface to eliminate on that may be established early in life or can change overnight. Your cat may have a surface preference if: they consistently eliminate on a particular texture, such as carpet, bedding, tile, cement, bathtubs, or sinks; they frequently scratch on the same texture after going, even if they used the litterbox; and they are or previously were an outdoor cat that prefers grass or soil.

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

Location Preferences

Your cat may have location preferences if: they always eliminate in quiet, protected places, such as in a closet or under a desk; they always eliminate in the area where the litterbox previously was or where there are urine odors; or they eliminate on a different level of the house than where the litterbox is.

Put at least one litterbox on every level of your house, and make the area where they are soiling aversive by covering it with an upside down carpet runner, aluminum foil, or citrus-scented cotton balls. OR Put a litterbox where your cat has been soiling. When they are consistently using it for at least a month, you can gradually move it to a more convenient spot at a rate of an inch per day.

What Not to Do

Don't ever punish your cat for going outside the litterbox. If you find a soiled area, it's too late to try and change the behavior. Any type of punishment will only make your cat afraid of you and they won't understand what you are trying to tell them. Just clean it thoroughly to eliminate any odor so your cat isn't motivated to go there again.

