

BEHAVIOR Training

Kentucky Humane Society

LITTER BOX ISSUES

Cats who have issues using a litter box make up a big portion of owner surrender cats at shelters. It can be stressful to be the caretaker for cats that aren't using the litter box consistently but there is hope. Making a few small changes can often make a big difference. One thing to always do if your cat is having litter box issues is to make sure the incorrect elimination area is cleaned thoroughly with an enzyme based cleaner. This will prevent the cat from using that area because it "smells like the litter box".

Medical Issues

There are many reasons a cat will stop using her litter box but medical issues are the most common. Especially if your cat used to be litter trained and is now having accidents, taking her to the vet to rule out a medical issue is the first step. Try to observe your cat's new bathroom habits so you can tell the vet as much as possible about where she is going, how often and if anything has changed consistency or amount. Is she straining when she goes? Does she seem to be in pain? If the improper elimination is urine, does she pee on vertical or horizontal surfaces? Once medical issues have been ruled out, if improper elimination is still happening, other reasons can be explored.

Cats that have been declawed can have lasting side effects from the process long after the surgery is done. Nerve damage from the surgery and early onset of arthritis are two of the most common side effects that can create pain and litter box avoidance. Especially right after surgery, it can feel like little knives cutting your cats paws when she steps in the box and that feeling can keep her from using the box long after she has healed. If you cat is declawed and you suspect declawing complications, bring her to a vet for an exam to detect osteoarthritis, phantom pain, bone re-growing or other problems that can occur days or years after the surgery. There may be something the vet can do to alleviate or reduce the pain. In addition, using a very soft-textured clumping non-clay litter is recommended such as a corn based litter.

The Litter Box

Some cats will be very picky about going in a dirty litter box. Make sure the litter box is being scooped daily and all the litter is being changed weekly and the box washed with a mild detergent (not bleach or ammonia) monthly. The type of litter you use can be very important to your cat as well. Many cats are repelled by scented litter or litter with strange textures so sticking to a plain clay clumping litter is best. Have multiple litter boxes in your house. The number of cats plus 1 is ideal for litter box numbers and will help with cats who don't like to use a litter box someone else has already used. Make sure the litter boxes are big enough for the cats to stand up and turn around in, not covered and in quiet places (not next to the washing machine). If you have an automatic cleaning box, the noise of the cleaning may frighten the cat especially if it turns on while the cat is still using the box and may deter your cat from using the litter box correctly. If your cat did have a medical problem causing litter box issues, she may still associate the litter box with the pain she was in, so getting a litter like Cat Attract™ may help.

Behavioral

Cats can have litter box issues due to many behavioral reasons. The first and most common is territory marking in unaltered cats. Both unaltered males and females can mark so if you are having a litter box issue, get your animals altered right away.

Stress can also cause litter box disturbances. If you have recently moved, brought in a new pet or had a baby, your cat could be reacting to those changes. Try to reduce your cats stress by placing him in his own room where it is quiet and away from the new stressor if possible. Slowly reintroduce your cat to the new addition to your family. Sometimes stress can be so extreme or so long lasting that medical intervention is necessary. Please consult your veterinarian if you believe that is the case.

When your cat is having litter issues, punishing her after the fact, or even during the act can cause further trauma to the cat and may even cause her to be afraid of you. Never use a spray bottle, yell at your cat, rub her nose in it or do any other sort of punishment to your cat. None of these things will solve the underlying issue and may even make the problem worse as the cat will not only associate the litter box with pain but also fear.

If you need additional advice, please contact the Kentucky Humane Society's free pet HELP line at **(502) 509-4PET (4738)** to discuss your cat's behavior issues with a trained volunteer.

