

# Cat Litter Box Issues

Basic Feline Care



## CARE SHEET

Developed with and approved by a Qualified Veterinarian

To us, nothing is simpler. You buy a litter box, put it on the floor, fill it up and the cat uses it. What's not to like? Ask the cat!

**Litter Box** Finicky felines have a very sensitive sense of smell to go with their sensitive dispositions. They are easily upset by changes in their environment and can't tell you what is bothering them. These facts sometimes add up to create an upset Kitty that won't use his litter box. You may have to wade through a lot of possibilities until you find a solution.

**Litter Box** **Dirty Litter Box?**

**Issues** Cats are meticulously clean, and cannot tolerate the smell or feel of a dirty box. Scoop the box at least once a day, more often if you have more than one cat. If Kitty can't find a clean place to dig, he's outta there.

**Need More Litter Boxes?**

Provide at least one litter box for every cat in your household. Some experts recommend one per cat plus one more. This helps prevent territorial disputes.

If your house is large, provide a box at each end of the house. If you have two stories and a basement, put a box on each floor. Kitty doesn't want to make a 20 minute field trip to find his spot. And, if Kitty is old, it may be difficult for him to go up and down stairs.

**Wrong Box?**

Is your cat still a kitten? Maybe the sides of the box are too high, and he needs a shorter pan. Older cat? Is it difficult for him to jump into the box? If your cat is large and using a small or hooded box, he may be too crowded.

**Not Enough Privacy?**

Cats don't want to be bothered while they use the box. It's an important ritual to be able to scratch, bury, sniff and turn in a thousand circles before they deposit their "gift." If the dryer suddenly roars to life or a bunch of noisy kids go zooming through the room, Kitty may find a new place to eliminate. If he doesn't feel safe, he won't stay there. Sometimes a screen in front of the box or a hooded cover helps him feel more secure.

Is the dog bothering the litter box? Put up a baby gate to keep the dog out, or a small pet door that is too little for the dog to get through. Kitty will thank you.

**Medical Issues** **Medical Problem?**

A physical ailment may cause Kitty pain while he is eliminating. He could associate that discomfort with the litter box and choose another place to go. Some possibilities are: urinary tract infection, kidney failure, diabetes, or constipation. Your first step should be a trip to the vet to rule out any health problem.

**Recently Declawed?**

If you have just had your cat declawed, he may associate his sore feet and bandages with his litter box, and refuse to use it. Doctors often recommend temporarily using shredded newspaper instead of sand so that bits of litter won't get in the incisions. Most cats get over the recovery period just fine, but some have a hard time adjusting. Your vet may recommend giving your cat an anti-anxiety or pain-relieving drug temporarily. Please don't use over-the-counter medications on your cat. Get a prescription from the vet. Cats' systems are too small and sensitive to tolerate many types of drugs.

**Is your cat spayed or neutered?**

If not, get it done right away. A female cat in season or a sexually frustrated male may not use the box, and may even start spraying urine around the house. It's a habit that is easier to prevent from developing than to break. If prowling cats are outdoors, your indoor kitty may be aware of them and react to the stress.

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### Changes Has Anything Changed Around The House?

"Anything" really does mean "**ANY LITTLE THING.**" Cats are easily disrupted. Do you have a new pet? Especially if it's a cat, introduce them as slowly and stress-free as possible. If you have a new dog, let them smell each other through a door for a few days. Then introduce them with the dog on-leash. If the cat can be persuaded not to run, the dog has nothing to chase, and they will get off on the right foot. (PETCO offers Care Sheets regarding this topic)

A new baby? Let the cat smell baby blankets and other smells to get used to the new person. A new adult in the household? Same routine. Let him get used to their scent, and slowly meet the newcomer on his own schedule. Try to introduce changes gradually and one at a time.

Is company coming? The cat notices the flurry of activity beforehand, and may not be used to children, adults with booming voices, or even just the extra activity around the house. Try to keep his routine as unchanged as possible and your guests from bothering him in his private resting spots.

### Have You Changed Anything About The Litter Box?

If a new arrival, either pet or human, resulted in moving the cat's litter box, food or sleeping area, he has a lot to be upset about. Gradually make changes a week or two beforehand, so he doesn't associate it with guests, and try to move one thing instead of everything at once.

If the store is out of your brand of litter, try to get something as close as possible. Suddenly introducing scented or clumping litter may cause an uproar in the cat's routine. If you introduce liners or deodorizers that Kitty isn't used to, these could upset him too.

### Clean-up and Prevention

Treat the spots where Kitty has messed with an enzyme odor remover like Nature's Miracle®. After cleaning, cover the spot with foil or waxed paper, which will discourage him from returning since he doesn't like the feel of it on his paws. You can put his food dish or even an extra litter box in that spot. Gradually move the box or food back to its original place, moving it just a foot or so a day.

Other methods to discourage Kitty from returning to that spot: ultrasonic devices emit an annoying noise that humans cannot hear each time Kitty gets near the spot. Spray-on repellents will irritate his sensitive nose and send him away. A Scat Mat gives him a gentle jolt if he walks on it. Mothballs will also deter Kitty, but you have to smell them too.

An anti-anxiety medication given for a few weeks may solve the problem and get Kitty back on the right track. Consult with your veterinarian about possible treatment.

If all else fails, contact your nearest veterinary specialty hospital or university and ask them to recommend a behaviorist for consultation. It may cost quite a lot, but once the problem is solved, you can enjoy a happy relationship with your cat for many years.

### Suggested Reading

*Cats For Dummies* by Gina Spadafori and Paul Diono, DVM, DACVIM

*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Living With a Cat* by Carolyn Janik and Ruth Rejnes

*ASPCA's Complete Cat Care*

*How to Get Your Cat to Do What You Want* by Warren Eckstein