

Resolving Litterbox Problems

Tompkins County SPCA

Why does your cat, who has been clean as an angel for years, suddenly stop using her litter box? Understanding cat behavior is a tricky thing, but it can be done.

About one-third of all litterbox problems are caused by physical problems. Only medical care can resolve these problems, so the first step is to take the cat to a veterinarian to rule out bladder or urinary tract infections.

If your cat is not spayed or neutered, you are in for trouble. They must obey their urge to scent mark, so avoid the problem by spaying or neutering your pet. Once the hormones decrease, the urge to mark will also.

Finally, make sure your cat is not stressed. Changes in routine, household, or patterns in your life may stress out the cat and cause litterbox problems. Get the cat back to his/her normal routine or find a quiet place for the cat until the source of the stress passes. Keep in mind that cats do not avoid the litterbox to “punish” you or because they are “mad” at you. If stress is the cause of your cat’s litterbox problem, he or she is feeling worse than you are and is simply reacting to the pressure of the situation. Getting angry will only make things worse.

Once you rule out these possibilities, the rest is a process of elimination:

1. *Size matters.* Cats like to be comfortable, even in their litterbox. The bigger, the better. A litterbox for kittens will not do for your big bundle of love. The litterbox should be roomy, with low sides so that getting in and out is easy.
2. *A bit of privacy please.* Like the rest of us, cats like to be left alone. A cover might be just the thing for some cats, or a screen, and yet not for others. You need to learn what your cat likes. At the same time, you need to put the litterbox in a private place, but one that is easily accessible.
3. *Keep it clean.* Change the litter frequently, keep the litter deep (if it’s only a small amount, it’s time to change it!), scoop each and every day, and periodically wash the box out with water and soap (no ammonia!). No one likes a dirty bathroom. If you can smell the litterbox when standing nearby, it smells much worse to the cat who is mere inches away. Adding a scoop of baking soda to the freshly scooped or changed litter can also help eliminate odors.
4. *Keep up with the numbers.* Some cats will share their litterbox, others won’t. A safe rule is one litterbox per cat. But the more cats, the more you have to keep it clean.
5. *Location, location, location.* While privacy is a must, don’t make getting to the litterbox an obstacle course. If your cat, and your family, spend most of the time downstairs, a litterbox two stories up is definitely going to be private, but the distance is a

recipe for problems. Find a balance. And never put the litterbox near a roaring washing machine or hissing radiators.

6. *Routine.* Did you just change litters? Did you just move the litterbox? Has a new cat joined the household? Cats appreciate routine. Today's litterbox location must be tomorrow's and the day after. Decorating is nice, but keep it simple for the cat.

7. *It's the litter!* There are a lot of different litters on the market—scoop, scented, paperbased, wood pellets, crystals, regular, multi-cat, the list goes on. But not all cats like all litters. The cheapest scoopable litter is usually the way to go. Scented litters are for people, not cats. Cats generally prefer unscented litter. Try to introduce new options and new products, and your kitty might find the Oriental rug to be more accommodating.

8. *Mine!* Did a cat you used to live with pee in one spot? Is your cat now doing it? Your cat may be trying to tell that old cat that this house is his. Clean it thoroughly with bleach or enzymatic cleaners like Nature's Miracle to eliminate the smell, or better yet, put the cat's litterbox there. He is, after all, trying to tell you something.

9. *Be creative!* Some declawed cats develop an aversion to the feeling of litter on their sensitive paws. Other cats may develop a strong preference for urinating on soft things like blankets or laundry. If you cannot find a commercial litter to please such a cat, what often works is putting folded newspaper or a folded rag in the litterbox instead. These can be thrown away (or in the case of rags, washed) daily.

Finally, if—and only if—all these steps fail, it is time for “reprogramming” the cat. Isolate the cat to one room with the litterbox and do not let him out until he uses it faithfully. Once he does, let him venture out for small periods at a time, always within easy reach of the litterbox. So long as he keeps using it, pretty soon he can once again have the run of the house. (This won't work if the problem is actually one of the issues discussed above, so make sure you go through all the previous steps first.)

Always keep a positive, compassionate attitude. Anger will only stress the cat and cause further problems. Working through each step of the problem takes patience. But once you resolve the issue, you and your cat can stop thinking about litterboxes, and go back to being best friends.

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