



"About Animals"

With Jan Beckwith

President, [Second Chance Fund for Animal Welfare](#) (SCFAW)

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Transcript

Resolving Litter Box Issues with House Cats

Hi, I'm Jan Beckwith, President and Founder of Second Chance Fund for Animal Welfare. I'm coming to you today from WCUW 91.3 FM, with a show called "About Animals." This is the third in a series of Friday programs that will cover this broad subject. I'll address different topics that I hope will interest the animal-loving listener.

Of course I don't know everything there is to know about animals, but I have had some experience working with animals, their people, veterinarians, Animal Control, and people doing rescue. So I hope to make the shows interesting for you. And I'd love to hear your suggestions going forward. In fact, part of the show will be to respond to emails sent in. Email me your questions or comments at wcuw@wcuw.org.

Today's topic is Resolving Litter Box Issues with House Cats. I hope I'm not scaring off any of our listeners with this perhaps unsavory topic. But it's something that affects many cats - and their caregivers - so here goes.

House cats who don't use the litter box, even ones adored by their families, can quickly find themselves in trouble. If things get out of hand, the very security of their having a home can be in jeopardy.

What I hope to do today is demystify this very common dilemma and give you some things to think about and try if you're facing such a situation. It's possible to resolve the issue - I speak from experience! - so listen on.

The first thing to rule out is [Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease](#), or FLUTD. About a third of all litter box problems are indeed caused by a medical problem. So if your cat is not urinating in a litter box, take him or her to see your veterinarian. Only your veterinarian can determine whether your cat is actually having a medical problem for sure.

It's very important to rule this out. FLUTD can be very painful and can cause an immediate need to go, so often your kitty may not be able to get to the box in time. If the problem is caught early, treatment can be as easy as a diet change. Untreated, FLUTD can get worse and even become life threatening if a blockage results. So don't delay if you suspect an issue.

Telltale signs include squatting randomly and anywhere as if to urinate and producing little or no urine, excessive licking of genitals, crying after urination, and bloody urine. Sometimes, a cat with FLUTD will go in and out of the litter box over a short period of time unable to urinate. It's this last behavior - a clear inability to urinate - that is an emergency. Do not wait, as death can come in 24 hours if untreated.

Another related cause of inappropriate urination, once a medical problem has been ruled out, is a cat coming of age without having been spayed or neutered. As I explained in our first "About Animals" show a few weeks ago, nuisance behaviors can be quite severe with house cats that are not fixed. Spraying in corners to mark territory by males and aggressive behavior due to hormonal shifts, which can be accompanied by urinary leakage in females, are common.

While at your veterinarian's ruling out a medical problem, no doubt he or she will suggest spaying or neutering your cat if this is not already done. Spaying or neutering is a very wise second step in resolving your litter box issue and can extend the life of your kitty as well!

If the expense of such a procedure is of concern to you, my group - Second Chance Fund for Animal Welfare - has a program that offers affordable and accessible spay/neuter services. Call our hotline at 978-779-8287 or go on our website <http://www.secondchancefund.org> to sign up. It's quick and easy, so don't delay.

OK, onto the third step. So your kitty is in great shape from a medical perspective, but just isn't using his box. Why on earth not?

An important thing to keep in mind while you sort out the root cause of the problem is that your cat has not suddenly become evil and trying to punish you! He or she is still the loving little creature you have come to know, enjoy, and adore, but there's something he or she is trying to tell you. And the longer it goes on, the worse your kitty feels! He or she may have been trying to tell you "this" (whatever this is) for a while in "cat-speak," but you weren't listening. So now the "volume" has been turned up, and your kitty has your full attention!

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OK, now, with a nod to late night talk show host David Letterman, onto the Top 10 list of possible reasons your cat is not using his or her litter box. Drum roll, please!

*Number 10: Here, **size matters!*** Cats like to be comfortable, particularly in their litter box. The bigger the box, the more litter to scratch in and scatter about, the better. Make sure your cat can easily dig a place then turn around several times in the box before squatting. If you have one that prefers to stand up (and this can be for both females as well as males), it's best to get a cover for the litter box. Covered boxes come in large sizes too.

*Number 9: **Privacy is important,*** even for cats. Like the rest of us, cats like to be left alone when in the "bathroom." If the litter box is in an open area you may want to consider getting a screen or a cover to hide your feline while doing her business. Experiment with what works for your kitty, but make sure it is always accessible for obvious reasons.

*Number 8: **Location, location, location!*** What's true in real estate is also true for the location of the litter box. While privacy is a must, make sure that you don't create an unnecessary obstacle for your cat to reach it. Don't put it in the cellar if your family needs to remember to keep the cellar door ajar. If someone forgets and shuts the door, it's not your kitty's fault for having an accident!

Similarly, don't put the box two stories up in your home if your family spends most of the time on the first floor. Too much distance can spell disaster! Also consider the distraction factor. For some cats, having a litter box next to the washer or dryer, the furnace, or a hissing radiator is a deterrent. Try to think about it from your cat's perspective and what might make him or her consider avoiding the litter box near a noisy appliance.

*Number 7: **Keep it clean!*** This is probably one of the most important points to consider on this list. Would you use a bathroom that hadn't been cleaned for a long time? (Think of all those awful truck stop bathrooms on the highway!) You should scoop the litter box daily and replenish the lost litter every few days to keep the level at least 2 inches deep. This will help your cat in digging and covering, vital activity for a satisfactory feline litter box experience. It also makes it easy for you to scoop without having to scrape wet litter off the bottom and sides.

Last, even if you don't smell it, after a couple of weeks, litter gets smelly to your cat. It absorbs all the smells of past uses and is easily a turn off for a very clean cat. Did you know that cats have a sense of smell a thousand times more sensitive than we do? It's true! When you change the litter, be sure to soak the empty box in hot soapy water for at least 10 minutes and rinse it well before drying and refilling.

Once final word on cleaning: Do not use bleach. Bleach will break down the plastic of the litter box and cause pitting. Smell will get into the pits and not be easily cleaned out, so the box will never quite smell clean to your cat.

*Number 6: **Keep up with the numbers!*** If you have one cat, two litter boxes are better than one. If you have a multiple cat household, you should have at least one box per cat, if not

even an additional one. In our house, we have four cats and seven boxes. Why is this if you scoop every day? Because some cats won't use a litter box that others have used. It just doesn't have their scent. So keep this in mind too when cleaning and make sure you scoop up the whole clump!

**Number 5: *It's all about the litter!*** There are tons of choices on the market. What you might think is fabulous, fragrant and dust free, might be the last box your cat will go in. Fragrant to you can be offensive to your cat. They want to smell dirt or sand, not flowers. The cheapest, scent-free version you can find is the very best way to go. Introducing what you think is a better option for scoopability, to keep the area clean and fresh smelling, may make your new oriental rug much more attractive than the box!

**Number 4: *Be creative!*** Some declawed cats develop a dislike for the feeling of litter on their sensitive paws. Other cats may develop a strong preference for urinating on soft things like blankets and laundry. If you can't find a commercial litter to please such a cat, what often works is putting folded newspaper or a bunched up rag in the litter box instead. These can be thrown away daily or in the case of the rags washed like we used to do "back in the day" with baby diapers.

I used to have a kitty that refused to use the box ever but always used the little rubber-backed mat I put in front of it every day. So I bought several of those mats and just changed them out. She and I were quite happy with that arrangement for years!

**Number 3: *It's my turf!*** Did a cat you used to have pee in one spot outside the box? If your cat has discovered that spot and goes there now too, he is leaving a calling card that says "I'm top cat now!" Make sure to clean the area thoroughly with a neutralizing solution like Simple Solution (my personal favorite, as it breaks down urine into water and doesn't leave a scent) or Natures Miracle. And put something over the spot to deter your cat from revisiting for a while until he forgets.

**Number 2: *Routine rules!*** Did you just decide to buy a new litter or even a new box? Did you move the box to a new (and possibly noisy) location? What may be more convenient for you may not be so for your finicky feline. Keeping it simple is the best way to go with cats. But if your cat's favorite litter disappears off your grocery store's shelf or the litter box is just too worn out to see another scrubbing, introduce newness slowly.

If you must change litter, do so gradually, adding the new litter to the old a few handfuls at a time until your cat accepts it. A new box? Keep the old one side by side until the transition is complete. Your kitty won't mind new as long as old doesn't disappear too quickly for an adjustment.

And to **Number 1** possible reason your cat is not using his or her litter box: You guessed it! **Stress.** Yes, stress is the catch-all answer for everything, it seems. When you see your

doctor and he or she can't explain why you're having symptoms, what do they say? "Stress!" Well, there's a lot of truth to what havoc stress in a cat's life can cause.

Stress comes in many forms for a cat, particularly one who has known a quiet consistent routine for a while, particularly the older cat. Stress can be caused by any change in routine: kids finishing school in June, or going back to school in September, having visitors come to stay, bringing home a new baby, acquiring a new pet. Stress can be caused by moving your home or renovating it, or by family members leaving for college or extended trips.

What do you do when you can't control the stress? The worst thing you can do is get angry and blame the cat for the upsetting behavior, even though it is admittedly awful and only adds to your own stress. Patience and providing a safe haven for your cat while an adjustment period passes can be so helpful. Give your kitty some time away from all the new noise and activity, where he or she can find a calm quiet spot to relax and unwind like a spare room or the attic (as long as he or she can stay warm). Introduce new members slowly and gradually, particularly a new cat. Once your cat comes to get used to a new situation, his or her behavior should return to normal.

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I don't want to candy-coat this issue and say it always disappears after a while. The truth is that sometimes some reprogramming is needed when the new bad habits take hold and won't let go. You may need to limit your cat's access to your entire home and allow short supervised visits outside a room or crate only after the litter box is being used again regularly.

Often short "visits" like this that are uneventful and stress-free can serve to reinforce prior behaviors that were more in keeping with a cat's instinct to be clean and have an odor free environment. Cats will mark only when threatened, warning the perceived threat that they are there. Anything you can do to reinforce a cat's safe environment will be time well spent.

A final note. If you find that your cat is not able to let go of the trauma or stress of a situation and you have tried all 10 points I've discussed today without success, your veterinarian may be able to help. With my cat, it took an anti-anxiety medication to calm his nerves after a neighborhood dog chased him around our house. It worked quite quickly (within five or six days he was back in the box) and he was on it for six months only before we weaned him off. It was well worth it!

I hope this important, perhaps unsavory topic has been helpful to you - and, of course, to your cat. If you weren't able to take notes during the show and would like to hear the points again, please go to our website at www.secondchancefund.org to see the transcript of today's show. If you have any questions or would like to talk with our volunteers about your litter box issues, please feel free to call our hotline at 978-779-8287, or email me at wcuw@wcuw.org. Please be sure to put "About Animals" in the subject box. We will respond promptly.

In closing, I'd like to thank you all for listening and also thank Troy Tyree, Executive Director of WCUW 91.3 FM for broadcasting our show. If you'd like to contribute to what's discussed here on "About Animals," please feel free to email me at wcuw@wcuw.org. I'll try to answer all who email and bring your questions and suggestions up on the show as time allow.

Again, let me remind you that if you need support in getting your pet spayed or neutered, please call our hotline at 978-779-8287 or go online to www.secondchancefund.org.

Programs like this take resources, so please consider a generous donation to WCUW if you liked what you heard today! Join us again soon for another About Animals with me, Jan Beckwith, of Second Chance Fund for Animal Welfare.

Thanks again for listening, and have a wonderful weekend!



PO Box 118
Bolton, MA 01740
978-779-8287
www.secondchancefund.org