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Solving Litter Box Problems

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Cats tend to have surface and location preferences for where, and on what, they like to eliminate. Most cats prefer a loose, sandy substance, which is why they will use a litter box. It's only when their preferences include the laundry basket, the bed or the Persian rug, that normal elimination behavior becomes a problem. With careful analysis of your cat's environment, specific factors that have contributed to the litter box problem can usually be identified and changed, so that your cat will again use the litter box for elimination.

Some common reasons why cats don't use the litter box are: an aversion to the box, a preference for a particular surface not provided by the box, a preference for a particular location where there is no box, or a combination of all three. You'll need to do some detective work to determine the reason your cat is house soiling. Sometimes, the reason the litter box problem initially started may not be the same reason it's continuing. For example, your cat may have stopped using the litter box because of a urinary tract infection, and has now developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet. You would need to address all three of these factors in order to resolve the problem.

Cats don't stop using their litter boxes because they're mad or upset and are trying to get revenge for something that "offended" or "angered" them. Because humans act for these reasons, it's easy for us to assume that our pets do as well. Animals don't act out of spite or revenge, so it won't help to give your cat special privileges in the hope that she'll start using the litter box again.

Medical Problems

It's common for cats to begin eliminating outside of their litter box when they have a medical problem. For example, a urinary tract infection or crystals in the urine can make urination very painful. Cats often associate this pain with the litter box and begin to avoid it. If your cat has a house-soiling problem, check with your veterinarian first to rule out any medical problems for the behavior. Cats don't always act sick, even when they are, and only a trip to the veterinarian for a thorough physical examination can rule out a medical problem.

Cleaning Soiled Areas

Because animals are highly motivated to continue soiling an area that smells like urine or feces, it's imperative that you thoroughly clean the soiled areas (see our handout: "Successful Cleaning To Remove Pet Odors And Stains").

Aversion To The Litter Box

Your cat may have decided that the litter box is an unpleasant place to eliminate if:

- The box is not clean enough for her.
- She has experienced painful urination or defecation in the box due to a medical problem.
- She has been startled by a noise while using the box.
- She has been "ambushed" while in the box either by another cat, a child, a dog, or by you, if you were attempting to catch her for some reason.
- She associates the box with punishment (someone punished her for eliminating outside the box, and then placed her in the box).

What You Can Do

- Keep the litter box extremely clean. Scoop at least once a day and change the litter completely every four to five days. If you use scoopable litter, you may not need to change the litter as frequently. This will vary according to how many cats are in the household, how many litter boxes you have, and how large the cats are that are using the box or boxes. A good guideline is that if you can smell the box, then you can be sure it's offensive to your cat as well.
- Add a new box in a different location than the old one and use a different type of litter in the new box. Because your cat has decided that her old litter box is unpleasant, you'll want to make the new one different enough that she doesn't simply apply the old, negative associations to the new box.

- Make sure that the litter box isn't near an appliance that makes noise or in an area of the house that your cat doesn't frequent.
- If ambushing is a problem, try to create more than one exit from the litter box, so that if the "ambusher" is waiting by one area, your cat always has an escape route.

Surface Preferences

All animals develop preferences for a particular surface on which they like to eliminate. These preferences may be established early in life, but they may also change overnight for reasons that we don't always understand. Your cat may have a surface preference if:

- She consistently eliminates on a particular texture. For example, soft-textured surfaces, such as carpet, bedding or clothing, or slick-textured surfaces, such as tile, cement, bathtubs or sinks.
- She frequently scratches on this same texture after elimination, even if she eliminates in the litter box.
- She is or was previously an outdoor cat and prefers to eliminate on grass or soil.

What You Can Do

- If your cat is eliminating on soft surfaces, try using a high quality, scoopable litter, and put a soft rug under the litter box.
- If your cat is eliminating on slick, smooth surfaces, try putting just a very thin layer of litter at one end of the box, leaving the other end bare, and put the box on a hard floor.
- If your cat has a history of being outdoors, add some soil or sod to the litter box.
- Make the area where she has been eliminating aversive to her by covering it with an upside down carpet runner or aluminum foil, or by placing citrus-scented cotton balls over the area (see our handout: "Aversives For Cats").

Location Preferences

Your cat may have a location preference if:

- She always eliminates in quiet, protected places, such as under a desk downstairs or in a closet.
- She eliminates in an area where the litter box was previously kept or where there are urine odors.
- She eliminates on a different level of the house from where the litter box is located.

What You Can Do

- Put at least one litter box on every level of your house.
- Make the area where she has been eliminating aversive to her by covering it with upside down carpet runner or aluminum foil, or by placing citrus-scented cotton balls over the area (see our handout: "Aversives For Cats") OR
- Put a litter box in the location where your cat has been eliminating. When she has consistently used this box for at least one month, you may gradually move it to a more convenient location at a rate of an inch per day.

Oops!

If you catch your cat in the act of eliminating in the house, do something to interrupt her like making a startling noise, but be careful not to scare her. Immediately take her to where the litter box is located and set her on the floor. If she wanders over to the litter box, wait and praise her after she eliminates in the box. If she takes off in another direction, she may want privacy, so watch from afar until she goes back to the litter box and eliminates, then praise her when she does.

Don't ever punish your cat for eliminating outside of the litter box. If you find a soiled area, it's too late to administer a correction. Do nothing but clean it up. Rubbing your cat's nose in it, taking her to the spot and scolding her, or any other type of punishment, will only make her afraid of you or afraid to eliminate in your presence. Animals don't understand punishment after the fact, even if it's only seconds later. Punishment will do more harm than good.

Other Types Of House Soiling Problems

Marking/Spraying: To determine if your cat is marking or spraying, please see our handout: "Territorial Marking In Dogs And Cats."

Fears or Phobias: When animals become frightened, they may lose control of their bladder and/or bowels. If your cat is afraid of loud noises, strangers or other animals, she may house soil when she is exposed to these stimuli (see our handout: "The Fearful Cat").