



Introducing Your Cat to the Litter Box

The first step with any behavioral issue is to take your cat to the veterinarian for a full evaluation. Cats are very stoic animals and will hide illness and injury. Sometimes our only clue that something is physically wrong is a behavioral symptom. Many behavioral modification programs can begin in conjunction with or shortly after your trip to the veterinarian.

Some cats can be quite particular when it comes to where they eliminate. Some guardians expect cats to just “know” what to do and where to go, when in fact, they don’t always. If a kitten has been separated from its Mother or littermates too soon, it might not learn on its own. Someone has to help them, and that someone just might be you.

When you first bring your new cat or kitten home, they should be given their own room for at least a couple of days. They need time to acclimate to their environment, to you, and this will help them to understand where they are to potty as well. Give the cat time to investigate the room, and they will find the litterbox on their own. Do not place food and water bowls beside the litterbox, put those in an area away from the litterbox. If you don’t see your cat investigating anywhere near the litterbox, you can place the cat in the litterbox, but only if they are comfortable with you doing so. Don’t force them, and do not help move their paws in the litterbox either. This has to be a positive experience for them. It is best to give them time to investigate on their own.

Which litterbox do you need? Start with a basic litterbox, without a cover. Buy a standard sized litter box or a large clear Sterilite container that is 1.5 times an adult cat’s length. Cats need room to move around! They should have enough space to be able to turn around comfortably. If you do buy a covered litterbox, it must be tall enough so the cat can comfortably stand up. Most cats don’t like having a cover. Imagine walking into a small space, going potty, cleaning up (covering up), and then exiting. The litter box needs to be a positive experience for a cat and spending several minutes inside a dirty litter box is an unpleasant experience. Also, if there are other cats in the home, some might use this as a chance to pounce on the unassuming cat when it exits the litterbox. Some guardians will purchase a litter liner, and this is something you might have to try out to see what your cat thinks of it. If the cat doesn’t like that sound or feel of it, stop using it.

Which type of litter do you need? Kittens should not be given clumping litter. Kittens are curious, and may actually play or try to eat it. Unscented is best. Scented litter may actually cause your cat to not use the litterbox. Two inches of litter in the litterbox is recommended. Adults prefer unscented, clumping litter at a depth of 3-4 inches.

Where should the litter box be kept? It should continue to stay in the room your cat started out in. The general rule for litterboxes is to have 1 litterbox per cat plus 1 more. So, the 2nd litterbox should be

kept on another level in the home or another area for easy access whenever the cat has to “go”. The litter boxes must be in a quiet, stress-free area, and where the cat can have easy access to it at any time. If there are young children or other pets in the home, it is very important that they do not try to prevent the cat from getting to the litterbox. *See also the article on Setting up the Environment for Your Cat.*

How often does the litterbox need to be cleaned? Litterboxes should be scooped at least on a daily basis. Depending on the number of cats in the home, this may need to be done more than once each day. Change the litter at least on a weekly basis. This is also a great time to clean the litterbox. Soap & water is usually good enough for removing any stains or odor. You can use an enzyme-based cleaner if the urine odor is very strong, but it’s usually a good rule to allow a little odor, because your cat is familiar with it. Also, sometimes a chemical smell will turn off the cat from using the litterbox. If the litterbox is cleaned entirely of the cat’s scent, they may not use it. Remember, you probably won’t smell anything once it’s been cleaned with soap & water, but your cat probably can.

What if the cat refuses to use the litterbox? Please contact your Veterinarian if your cat stops using the litter box and using other areas. If your cat is not eliminating at all, contact your Veterinarian immediately to rule out any serious health issue. *See also the article on Solving Litter Box Problems.*

If after trying these suggestions you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your cat, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.

Written by the Wayside Waifs Animal Behavior Team

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