



# Solving Litter Box Problems

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*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.*

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Please keep in mind that cats do not eliminate on their guardians furniture, carpets, floors, bedding, or laundry because they are upset with them or out for revenge. The cat is often seeking an alternative, or believe it or not, trying to bond more with their guardian by mixing their scents together.

Litter box problems are one of the easiest cat problems to solve. It takes time and patience on the part of the cat's guardian. What is causing the problem? Which cat is causing the problem (if a multi-cat home)? What can be done to resolve the problem? How can it be prevented from happening again?

First and foremost, if your cat is eliminating anywhere except the litter box, your cat needs to be seen by a veterinarian immediately to rule out any medical issues. Once it is determined there aren't any medical or physical issues, the guardian must concentrate on solving the behavioral issue.

**Medical Problems** – if the cat is diagnosed with a medical problem that is causing discomfort or pain when the cat tries to eliminate in the litter box, the cat might associate the litter box as the source of that pain. If that's the case, the cat will seek out another area that might provide more comfort and no pain, such as furniture, laundry, or the floor. The cat needs to be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible. In some cases, this may turn in to a habit and behavior modification will be needed after medication is finished.

If you have more than one cat, and do not know who has the issue, separate each cat into its own room for a couple of days to monitor their litter box habits.

## **Reasons to Avoid the Litter Box:**

- The box isn't scooped often enough. It is recommended that the litter box be scooped on a daily basis.
- The box isn't cleaned often enough. It is recommended that the box be cleaned with soap & water on a weekly basis to clean any debris, and to remove any strong odors. Litter should be replaced every 5-7 days.
- There aren't enough litter boxes. There should be 1 litter box per cat in the home, plus 1 more.

- Something has caused the cat to fear the box i.e.: a loud noise, another pet in the home pouncing on the cat as s/he leaves the box, or being chased by another pet or a child when trying to get to the box.
- Experiencing pain or discomfort while trying to eliminate in the box due to a medical issue.
- The area that the box is located is noisy or stressful. Some cats also prefer each box to be in a different location in the home.
- If the cat was punished after eliminating outside the litter box, then put back into it.

**How to Properly Clean Soiled Areas** – if a soiled area is not properly cleaned, it is likely the cat will continue to eliminate in that area. If you have other cats in the home, they might even start eliminating in that area as well. So, it is extremely important to clean a soiled area properly and thoroughly, and as soon as possible. Blot the soiled area with paper towel until it is as dry as possible. Using an enzyme-based cleaner (Nature’s Miracle is a great product), soak the soiled area for approximately 5 minutes. Take paper towel and blot at the area until it is as dry as possible. If there is a stain, you may need to repeat the process more than once, and if it’s on carpet, use a soft bristle brush to help remove the stain. *See also the article on Reducing Urine Marking in Cats.*

**Preferences** – Cats can be finicky about their litter box and have particular needs that must be met. A lot of guardians purchase scented litter but most cats dislike it because the scent is too strong. A cat’s sense of smell is a lot stronger than humans, and while they would appreciate a clean-smelling area, adding something scented may not be to their liking.

The amount of litter used is important as well. It is recommended to add 2 inches of litter in a box. Some cats prefer a finer texture, some may prefer less litter and some might prefer more. Work with your cat and stick with what works. If it is working, don’t change it.

If your cat was previously an outdoor cat and that is where s/he used to eliminate, you may need to add some soil to the litter box until the cat is comfortable using the litter box.

**Location preference** – provide a peaceful area that is easily accessible for your cat. Choose an area with the least amount of stress. Providing litter boxes in different rooms or levels of the home is recommended, so the cat has options and can access the box quickly from any area.

**If your cat continues to eliminate anywhere but the litter box, here are a few ideas to deter him or her (after the soiled area has been properly cleaned):**

Place aluminum foil over the area. Most cats don’t like the sound of it. Place a plastic carpet runner upside down so the nubs are pointing upwards. Place a barrier that will prevent the cat from accessing that area. Place the cat’s food and water bowls in the soiled area. Begin playing with your cat in these areas so your cat associates that area with playing rather than elimination.

Place the litter box over the area that was soiled. Gradually, once the cat starts to use the litter box again for several weeks, the box can be slowly moved back to its proper location. Gradually means this could take days or weeks or months, depending on how consistently your cat is using the box again.

**Praising and rewarding** your cat after she or he has properly eliminated in the litter box is very important. Provide a tasty treat immediately afterwards and praise is always a nice touch as well. Do not ever punish your cat for not using the litter box. Usually, you will discover this has happened a long

time afterwards, and the cat won't understand what you are doing and it could possibly damage the bond between the two of you. Just clean up the mess and stay calm as if nothing happened.

If the cat or kitten is new in your home, and poops outside of the litter box, sometimes simply putting the feces back into the litter box for a day is enough to teach them where to properly eliminate. Buy Litter Attract, found at most pet food stores, to help entice the cat to use the litter box.

If you know there are outdoor cats near your home, this could cause your cats to spray or mark indoors, usually near perimeter walls. Buying motion-detected deterrents from pet stores might be enough to stop the problem. *See also the article on Detering Cats Outside the Home.*

***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](http://www.waysidewaifs.org).***

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