



# Litter Box Problems in Cats

Housoiling is one of the most common behavior problems in cats. It is normal for cats to have surface and location preferences for where and on what they like to eliminate. It's only when these preferences include the laundry basket, the bed, or the Persian rug that these normal behaviors become problems. With careful analysis of the cat's environment specific factors can usually be identified which have contributed to the litter box problem.

**MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS:** Cats don't stop using the litter box because they are mad or upset and are trying to get revenge for something that "offended" or "angered" them – this is a myth. Because humans act for these reasons, it is easy to assume that cats do as well. But cats, or other animals, do not act out of spite or revenge, so it won't help to give your cat special privileges and hope she'll start using the box again. If you've had your cat declawed, that is not likely to be the cause of the problem either. Studies show that declawed cats are no more likely to have litter box problems (or to bite) than are cats with their claws. "Stress" (a term that has many meanings) is not often the reason a cat stops using the litter box. If stress is involved, you should see other behavioral or physical changes as well such as weight loss, fearful behavior, or changes in eating or sleeping habits. **Punishment is not a way to resolve a litter box problem.**

**First, check with your veterinarian.** Health problems can cause litter box problems. Cats don't always act sick, even when they are. Only a trip to the veterinarian for a thorough physical exam, which may include a urinalysis, can rule out a medical problem.

**SPRAYING:** If your cat is given a clean bill of health by your veterinarian, the next step is to determine whether your cat is spraying or urinating outside the box. **Spraying** is urinemarking behavior, and it is a cat's way of indicating ownership of her territory. Marking is triggered by the presence of other cats. It can occur because neighborhood cats are "hanging around" outside, or because of conflicts between cats in a multi-cat household. Unfamiliar objects, smells, or people in the house can also cause the behavior. Spraying has nothing to do with litter box habits. When a cat sprays, she stands up, backs up against a vertical surface and deposits urine at "cat height" against curtains, doors, walls, furniture, etc. Her tail may quiver and she may alternately lift her hind feet while she sprays. Male or female, spayed or neutered cats of any age may spray, although the behavior is more common in unaltered males. Spraying problems can be drastically reduced or even completely resolved by:

1. Spaying or neutering any unaltered cats in the household
2. Discouraging the presence of neighborhood cats. Try blocking off windows from where your cat can see neighborhood cats. Discourage their presence with aversive odors.
3. Resolving conflicts between cats in the household. If family cats are fighting or skirmishing with each other, you'll need to help them get along better. Make sure good things happen to each of them in the presence of the other. Punishing the cats is likely to make the problem worse. You may need to separate them temporarily while working on the problem. A handout available from the SFAS&HS about introducing animals to each other may be helpful.
4. Talking to your veterinarian about possible short-term anti-anxiety drug therapy.
5. Make the sprayed areas less attractive using the techniques described below.

**ELIMINATION PROBLEMS:** If you are finding puddles or feces on the floor, then your cat is choosing not to eliminate in the litter box. The most common reasons why cats stop using the litter box are an aversion to the box, surface preferences, location preferences, or a combination of all three. You'll need to do some detective work to determine the reason for your cat's change in behavior.

**Aversion to the Litter box:** This means that your cat has decided that the litter box is an unpleasant place to be. The box may not be clean enough for her, she may have experienced painful urination or defecation in the box, she may have been startled by a noise while using the box, or perhaps she has been "ambushed" while in the box by either another cat, a child, a dog, or even by you if you were attempting to catch her for some reason. This kind of aversion may require you to completely replace the litter box so it no longer reminds your cat of unpleasant experiences. You may need to buy a new box, put it in a new location and use a different type of litter. Remember to keep the box clean – scoop out feces every day, and completely change litter anywhere from every three days to once/week.

**Surface Preferences:** All animals develop preferences for where 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. If your cat reaches out and scratches the carpet after she uses the box, she may come to prefer to use carpet instead of the litter box. Many cats seem to develop a preference for either soft surfaces such as piles of clothes or the bed, while others may prefer slick surfaces such as the bathtub or the kitchen sink. Cats with an outdoor history may prefer dirt or grass. To resolve a surface preference problem, the material in the litter box needs to be made more like the textures your cat prefers for elimination, and the places she's soiling need to be made less attractive. For example for a soft-surface preference, try the new fine-grained, clumping litter. If your cat has been using the bathtub, give her a slick surface in the litter box by placing very little if any litter in the box. If your cat has been outside, try generic potting soil in the box.

**Location Preferences:** Your cat may decide that she likes to eliminate in a particular location. Maybe her preference is for a quiet, protected place such as under a desk downstairs, or in the closet. She may like to go in a location where the litter box was previously kept, or maybe where a particular odor is located. Location preferences can be dealt with by moving the box to the preferred location, leaving it there until your cat uses it consistently for several weeks, and then **VERY GRADUALLY** moving it back to where you want it to be. If your cat does not use the box when you move it, then it is not a location preference problem.

**Clean Soiled Areas:** Soiled areas can be made less attractive by cleaning them with an enzymatic product such as Nature's Miracle or Odor Disposers. Repellant sprays are not usually effective. Make the soiled surfaces less attractive by covering them with double-sided sticky tape, plastic, or a vinyl carpet runner with the point side up. Give the areas an unpleasant smell by placing cotton balls saturated with muscle rubs, strong perfumes, or citrus scents. Give your cat something else to do in these areas (rather than eliminate) by placing toys or food dishes there.

The reason the litter box problem initially started may not be the same reason it is continuing. For example, your cat may have stopped using the box because it was not clean enough, and now has developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet. You'll need to address all three of these factors in order to resolve the problem.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado with the assistance of Rhea Dodd, D.V.M., Mary Anne Williams and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D., Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist. © Denver Dumb Friends League. All rights reserved.