

Help! He's Not Using the Litter Box

Cats have accidents outside the box for a variety of reasons. The first step in fixing the problem is to determine the reason for the problem, behavioral or medical. Always start with the assumption that the cat is not using the box due to a medical issue. Work with your vet to rule out medical problems. If the cat's issue isn't a medical one, then the following information should be helpful to you.

Cats do not come into this world "knowing" how to use a litter box, that is, a colored plastic box filled with sterilized clay gravel. Cats learn what and where the "bathroom" is from their mom when they are about four weeks of age. Learning can happen so quickly that that casual observer may be unaware that any active instruction has taken place. In the case of orphan kittens, the caretaker must introduce the box concept, otherwise the kittens will randomly choose a spot and imprint on the texture (cloth towels, dust balls, carpeting, etc.). The kitten should be placed in the litter box upon waking and after meals and vigorous play. Most kittens catch on and successfully use the box. The trick is to keep watch to make sure that the box is the only spot the kitten uses. An unsupervised kitten can easily lose track of the litter box; if nature calls, the opportunistic kitten will use whatever is handy.

Strays and Feral Cats

If the kitten was born outside, mom may have designated a clump of leaves or soft earth as the toilet. Imprinted on that texture, recently homed stray and former feral cats may have to be trained to use a box filled with clay litter. While some catch on quickly, others don't. Try a fine-grained sand type litter rather than gravel textured clay. In some cases it may be necessary to start off with the substance the cat was used to (soil, sand, newspaper) and gradually make the switch by changing the proportion of the old type to the new type over a period of several weeks. Clean the solids out of the litter box daily; completely change the litter and wash out the box as often as necessary to keep it clean and dry. Remember, a cat who lived outdoors had many sites from which to choose. A dirty box can drive the cat away from the box to a cleaner, drier spot (the back of your closet!). If the cat refuses to use the box at any stage, return to the last stage at which he was successful.

Is She Spayed...Is He Neutered?

Sexually mature cats use urine and feces to mark territory and advertise for a mate. Your cat should be spayed or neutered (males cats are neutered, females are spayed) between two and six months of age. This is a routine surgical procedure performed on an anesthetized cat by a veterinarian. Call your vet to get more information on the procedure. An intact cat that does not use the litter box is very difficult to train; the behavior may be hormonally influenced.

Spraying...What Is It and Why?

Is the urine puddle up against the wall or along the side of the sofa? If it's the latter, the cat is not urinating out of his box; he is spraying. When a cat squats, he empties his bladder to get rid of bodily waste. A cat does not squat when he sprays. He stands with his tail straight up and sends a stream of urine sideways. It hits the wall and runs down onto the floor. It is not clear whether spraying claims territory or warns trespassers to stay away, but it is clear that it has nothing to do with needing to "relieve" oneself. Overcrowding and stress are often at the root of spraying. Although both males and females spray, males tend to do so more frequently and unneutered males almost always do it. The good news is if an intact cat has just started to spray, very often neutering will put a stop to the behavior. If the cat has been allowed to spray for some time, it may be necessary to work with your veterinarian and an animal behaviorist to modify the behavior.

Clean Box...Clean Cat

Cats will often refuse to use the litter box if it isn't kept clean. For some cats this means cleaning out the box after each use, for others once every day or two is more than enough. If the cat thinks the box is dirty, he may use the area around the box (throw rug, sink or tub), especially if he scatters litter out of the box when covering.

Is He Really Box Trained?

Some cats can become oriented to the location of the box. You may think he is trained to the box when he is really trained to use the space in which you have placed the box. In this case, if you move the box, the cat will continue to eliminate where the box used to be. If you must change the box's location, move it a few inches each day until it reaches the new location. If you have moved into a new home, actively show the cat where the box is after he's eaten, when he wakes from napping or at times when you know the cat "has to go". Better yet, isolate him in one room for a few days (preferably the room where the box will be), then slowly let him have greater run of the house.

He Uses the Box...Sometimes!

Has the cat ever used the box reliably for any length of time or does he have accidents? How frequently? A cat who has frequent accidents is not box trained. This cat is demonstrating that he doesn't know that there is only one place to eliminate...the in the box!

Use close supervision or confinement (see Retraining section below) to train the cat to use the box and ONLY THE BOX. All previously soiled areas must be cleaned and treated with an appropriate odor-neutralizing product. Whenever possible, visibly change the areas most frequently soiled. Cover with a chair, an end table, a garbage can or umbrella stand. If it doesn't look or smell like the "old bathroom", he will be less likely to return. If you see the cat sniffing or scratching around a forbidden area, gently but firmly direct him towards the litter box. If your cat has infrequent or predictable accidents (he always does it when I come back from vacation), this may be stress related behavior.

Don't Yell...Clean It Up!

Never hit or become aggressive with a cat for not using the box; punishing the cat after the act will not teach him to use the litter box when he's "got to go". Shouting, hitting and general stomping around will only serve to damage your relationship with the cat; it will teach him to watch out for you, that you are an unpredictable and frightening human.

It is important to clean the soiled area thoroughly with an enzyme-based cleaner that will remove the source (urine/feces) of the odor as well as take out the stain. If you can't get to a pet supply store, an adequate substitute can be made from equal parts of seltzer and white vinegar. Never use ammonia or ammonia-based products to clean up. They will attract the cat back to the spot. Frequently soiled foam-backed carpets or carpet padding can break down emitting an ammonia-type odor. When this happens, enzyme cleaners may not work. In these cases, remove the padding and replace it. Follow package directions carefully; make sure you are using the product best suited for your type of mess (old, dried spots; new spots; spots previously cleaned; etc.)

Is It Spite? No, It's Stress!

Environmental stress takes its toll on house cats. Studies indicate that there is a high correlation between ongoing stress and stressful events and house soiling. Cats are as individual as people. Some are bold, outgoing and adventurous; they are resilient and forgiving. Others are timid and lack confidence. They slink from room to room and run from strangers. Like little old maiden aunts, most cats thrive on the predictability of a daily routine. Personal crisis, a new family member (spouse, baby) or redecorating are significant events from the feline point of view. A dinner party (a bunch of noisy strangers all over the place), going away for the weekend (isolation, change in routine and/or caregiver) or having the plumber come in to fix the sink (trespasser) may cause the cat to feel threatened and become anxious. Anxious cats may spray or urinate or defecate outside the box.

Take the time to learn who your cat is and how you can meet his needs to minimize his stress. Whenever possible, insulate the sensitive cat from stressful events. Create a sanctuary for the cat now; bed him down there during the big party or when you're using power tools. Prepare the cat well in advance of a change in routine. Have the cat sitter come and feed the cat several times before you leave on vacation.

Dealing with stressful situations can be more difficult than the retraining exercises. Both objectives should be worked on simultaneously. The cat may continue to avoid the box and/or urinate on personal objects like bedding, clothing and your favorite chair in the presence of unresolved ongoing/escalating stress. This is not to say you must eliminate the stressful element but you must alter the cat's perception of that element through socialization or desensitization. Consider working with a behaviorist to modify your cat's behavior.

The Multi-Cat Household

It is known that cats have a loose, changeable social hierarchy that includes not only dominant and subordinate roles, but pariahs or outcasts as well. It is perhaps important to note that there are no hard and fast rules; that structure is dependent on the individual personalities and characters of the cats involved. This is most applicable in the case of the outcast cat. These cats hide most of the time or spend their days on the highest spots they have access to, rarely touching the floor. The other cats may fight with them regularly; they rarely fight back. If you find that the house soiler is an "outcast", discuss with your veterinarian options for correcting this behavior.

Ongoing stress within a multi-cat household can drive one or more members to spray (mark territory) or urinate or defecate outside of the box. If the presence of a new cat is causing the existing cat to house soil, confine the newcomer. Make every attempt to keep the first tenant's life as stable as possible. Other solutions for the multi-cat household include multiple litter boxes placed in separate spaces, and creating more "cat places" with multiple levels (scratching posts with hideouts/lookouts, carpeted window shelves, etc.).

Retraining...Can He Be Helped?

The first step towards a solution is to rule out any health problems (worms, cystitis, intestinal disease) by having the cat thoroughly examined by your veterinarian. Once it has been determined that the cat is in good health, training can begin.

A combination of confinement and supervised freedom is the method of choice. The cat starts the program in confinement. Most cats do well in small rooms. The bathroom is recommended as it typically has non-absorbent tile flooring and offers a peaceful sanctuary. Since the bathroom is an essential room for humans, the cat is not isolated for extended periods of time. In addition to those necessary trips to the bathroom, you should make time for three to four 20 minute sessions with the cat either playing, grooming, talking or feeding. Put a cat bed at one end, and the litter box at the other. If the cat urinates on the cat bed, it must be removed. Feed the cat two meals a day, leaving the food down for approximately 20 minutes. Keep a diary, note when the cat uses the litter box.

When the cat has been using the box and ONLY the box for 2 weeks, you can begin to allow him access to other rooms in the house one room at a time. Observe from a distance; make sure that he has not fallen prey to old habits! The best time to let him roam is right after he's used the box, returning him to confinement before his next scheduled "pit stop". Do not leave the cat out when you are not home. Only when you observe the cat reliably returning to the litter box on his own can you begin to cut back on the supervision. It is better to proceed slowly and build a strong foundation than to rush through the procedure because it is inconvenient or time consuming. In order for effective learning to take place, the cat must be watched carefully and encouraged to use the box. Consistency is everything. If you catch the cat using the box, gently praise and perhaps offer a treat. Reward appropriate behavior.

The complexities of cat behavior become quite evident when dealing with the cat who does not reliably use his box. The solutions often require patience and will always require consistency. Be sensitive to your cat's needs. Your investment of quality time and attention will be well rewarded.

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