

# Litter Box Issues

## Litterbox issues are a SYMPTOM.

**Cats are very stoic and hide their pain well, so peeing/pooping outside the litterbox is often the first sign of a medical issue.**

When having difficulty with elimination, cats often seek safe, comforting places - in order to minimize their discomfort and feelings of vulnerability.

If your kitty is having accidents please contact your Veterinarian for appropriate tests to rule out gastrointestinal problems, urinary tract infections, crystals and cystitis.

**Medical issues can be treated relatively quickly and easily, but will build bad litterbox habits if left undiagnosed, so it's always better to know what you're dealing with.**

## Questions to consider with your vet

1. **Does your cat cry or strain in the litterbox? Or go in and out without producing anything? Clean their genitals very frequently? **This may indicate an urgent medical situation!****
2. How often do accidents happen (always/daily/2-3x per week... ?) is it consistent/regular or periodic/gets better and worse?
3. Are urine accidents large or small quantities of urine? Does your cat pee frequently and in small amounts?
4. Does the urine smell?
5. If pooping out of the box, how soft/firm are the poops? Do they smell particularly strong? Do they poop every day?
6. Where do they have accidents? Is it always in the same location(s), or do locations seem to be random?
7. What food are they eating? (wet/dry/raw? What brand?)
8. Have there been any potential stressors that may have triggered the peeing? Guests, noise from outside, new furniture, etc... any other changes in the home?

# General Litterbox tips/first steps:

## Do not scold cats for accidents!

Cats usually misinterpret scolding/negative feedback to mean peeing/pooping itself is unwanted - and then they become more anxious and try to find hidden places to relieve themselves. Positive reinforcement helps... scratch in the box and give treats, etc... give praise and/or treats whenever you see the cat using the box, or show them the used box and then give praise and treats

## Do a very thorough cleaning of any soiled areas

Regular household cleaners are not sufficient for cleaning up pet stains. Cats will return to places that smell like urine and have accidents repeatedly. They have a much better sense of smell than we do, so just because you can't smell cat pee anymore doesn't mean that they can't!

We recommend using an enzyme cleaner meant for pet stains, such as Nature's Miracle, or a mix of 16oz hydrogen peroxide + 1 tbsp (15mL) baking soda + 1 tsp (5mL) dish soap. - you can find larger containers of peroxide in the laundry aisle (usually labelled "oxygen" or "chlorine-free" bleach).

If on a soft surface like a couch or carpet, do not soak with water: this will dilute the urine and spread it around further, making it harder to clean. Dab up as much of the accident as you can with a clean dry cloth or paper towel and then soak thoroughly with pet stain cleaner.

**IMPORTANT:** no matter what cleaner you use, you must make sure all of the urine residue gets broken down. Thoroughly saturate the entire stain with the mix, allow to dry, saturate again, allow to dry again...**\*saturate and let dry at least 3 times\*** - more for soft/absorbant surfaces.

## Protect target areas

It's a good idea for anyone with pets to have a waterproof mattress cover, IKEA sells decent ones for relatively cheap - <https://www.ikea.com/ca/en/catalog/products/60281224/>

You may want to consider getting a cover or some fabric incontinence pads to protect couches and chairs short term until you are more confident in the cat's litter use eg:

[https://www.ebay.ca/sch/Medical-Mobility/11778/i.html?\\_nkw=washable+incontinent+bed+pads&\\_frs=1](https://www.ebay.ca/sch/Medical-Mobility/11778/i.html?_nkw=washable+incontinent+bed+pads&_frs=1)

## Keep your kitty in the bathroom

It's best to confine the cat(s) to a small room or bathroom while you figure out why they are having trouble with the litter box.

Preferably give them 2 litterboxes in their room. Clear out any cupboards and clean off window sills, etc - to give them extra space; and get them set up as nicely as possible with toys, scratcher, bed, etc.

Keeping them confined to a bathroom helps in a few ways:

- Reduces environmental stress: Cats feel less stressed in small spaces.

- Removes opportunities for accidents to happen: they usually happen on soft surfaces like duvets or laundry; and/or in hidden corners. Don't leave things like bathmats or dirty towels out in the bathroom. Just a folded towel to sleep on, preferably put it up off the floor on a counter, low shelf, etc. If they pee/poop on the towel, you will need to remove that as well.
- Allows you to make sure they are using the box consistently without any accidents (and especially hidden accidents that you don't notice).
- Keeps any accidents confined to a space that is easy to clean, for your sake and theirs: kitties are likely to have a repeat accident in the same location if there is any lingering smell from their previous accident.
- If your cat has a buddy they are bonded to, put both kitties in the bathroom/small room together, even if the other is good with the litterbox. Staying together will reduce stress.
- If the cat tends to pee on soft surfaces, it's a good idea to also cover their bedding in a plastic bag and then put inside a pillowcase (use folded towels in plastic + pillowcase if their beds don't fit) This keeps the bedding clean/easier to wash and also stops it from absorbing the pee nicely (wet feet = deterrant). Cinch the pillowcase **tightly** closed with a ziptie. DO NOT leave a cat alone with access to the plastic bag.

This step is very important, no matter the cause of the problem, because poor litterbox use quickly becomes a bad habit.

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### **Cats with bad litterbox habits are often returned to us and can face a LIFETIME struggle with finding and keeping adoptive homes!**

Some people initially think it's "mean" to have kitty in the bathroom for a week, but it actually reduces stress and gives them the best chance to be successful with the box, so is much kinder in the grand scheme of things.

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### **If confinement is upsetting for your kitty:**

Try sitting in there with the cat, playing with toys, giving treats or other distractions... even doing stuff on your phone/computer or reading... your company will help them settle faster. Try to wait until they are nice and relaxed and sleepy before leaving.

Try not to respond to crying.

Instead, check in with your kitty frequently and on a regular basis, eg: have a visit in the bathroom for 5-10 minutes every hour on the hour when you are home; plus tap on the door and say hello whenever you go past the door. This will be more effective in reassuring your kitty that you are thinking about them and haven't forgotten to visit, so they don't feel the need to get your attention.

# Once Medical Issues have been RULED OUT:

## Litter Retraining

When there is no obvious cause for the litterbox issues, we advise keeping your kitty in the small room/bathroom until they have gone at least 5 days with no accidents. Then you will gradually start letting them back out into the house

If at any point kitty has an accident, they go back to square one in the bathroom.

### After 5 days of good litterbox use - no accidents

You can begin to let your kitty out for closely supervised visits, a few hours a day. Return the kitty to the bathroom when you aren't home or are sleeping.

- It's advisable to keep the kitty out of bedrooms and away from dirty laundry at first
- At this stage, have at a litterbox in each room kitty is given access to, in addition to their regular litterbox arrangements.
- **TIP! Keep a little bit of dirty/peed-on litter each time you clean the litterbox, and add it back into the fresh litter. The smell will signal to your kitty what the litter box is there for. Do this for at least a month after litter retraining, to reinforce good habits.**

### After 3 days of supervised time

You can start letting kitty out and about again, preferably increasing unsupervised time gradually..

Keep the cat out of the bedroom for a month (it takes the brain about a month to build new neural pathways, so the new routine becomes a habit) - at least when unsupervised. Slowly re-introduce them - Have a litterbox in the bedroom at first, start with short, supervised visits and gradually increase the amount of time they can be in there.

## Problem solving

Now that kitty has been using the box consistently in the bathroom, it's time to find out why they are having trouble with the box. It will take a little patience to figure out what your kitty likes best, but it will be well worth the effort.

**Remember to always change only one thing at a time, and always introduce new options before removing old options - eg to try a new kind of litter, put out a similar size/shape box of each litter type in similar locations.**

### Things to consider:

- What type of box are you using? e.g. some big kitties and older kitties/kitties with mobility issues need a big box, **ideally the box should always be at least 1.5 times the length of the cat;** and

most cats prefer uncovered boxes, but some kitties like the security of a covered box, so you can always try adding a covered one to see if kitty prefers it

- Is the box being cleaned daily?
- How many boxes do you have? Try adding another litterbox or two, the general rule of thumb is 1 box/cat plus 1. Some single kitties will require 2 boxes.
- Where are the litter boxes located?
  - For young kittens it is especially important to have multiple litter boxes around the house and in corners. If accidents happen, clean up with a tissue and then put the tissue into the litterbox to help teach the kittens that's where it goes.
  - If kitty is repeatedly going in the same place, try putting a box there.
  - Some kitties will prefer a quiet, private area, whereas others will prefer a spot that is in a socially significant area of the house
- Are there any environmental stressors? e.g. another cat in the household chasing them away from the box, or barring their pathway to the box; territorial issues such as another cat coming up to the window or other wild animals outside.
- What type of litter are you using? Is it scented or dusty? If you are currently using the pine pellets for litter, try adding a new box with one of these soft litters to see if the kitty prefers them:
  - Feline Fresh clumping
  - World's Best Cat Litter
  - Swheat Scoop
  - You can also try sprinkling some “Dr Elsay’s Cat Attractant” litter additive on your regular litter to encourage kitty to use it
- If kitty is peeing/pooping in the tub or sink, put the plug in and add a small amount of water (just enough that their paws will get wet if they jump in). Make sure there is a litter box nearby that they can use as an alternative.

Sink and/or bathtub accidents can sometimes be related to ammonia in household cleaners - Fantastik, Mr Clean, drain cleaners, Windex...the ammonia smell lingers in the drain and confuses the cat because cat urine also produces ammonia.

Ammonia is not always disclosed on the label, but some “natural” cleaning product companies (a few: <http://www.vipsoap.com/> <https://natureclean.ca/collections/all> <https://www.seventhgeneration.com/products/canada> ) disclose all of their ingredients. If unsure, flush out the drains with lots of hot water and a bit of baking soda or laundry detergent.

- **Females often have accidents when in heat, and males often have accidents when around females in heat. Remember to have your kitty fixed promptly at 5 months old.**
- If kitty is peeing on beds or dirty laundry: Beds are often a target, especially for kittens - cat beds, dirty towels are other common targets; human sweat actually has trace amounts of urea in it... So bedding and dirty laundry can seem like potential toilet areas.

**Dirty laundry** also often resides in a litterbox-like hamper, adding to the confusion; and beds are nice and soft and absorbent so cats feel like their urine has just disappeared. If you have a down comforter, the smell of the feathers can also make kitty want to pee there.

In this case, we recommend keeping kitty out of the bedroom for a month (takes about a month for the brain pathways to form for new habits) to build up really good litter box habits, then gradually introduce the cat to the bedroom, starting with supervised visits.

Have a litterbox in the room for his for the first few weeks to a month after letting his in there, and a mattress protector would be a good idea. Alternatively, or as an intermediate step when you start giving access to the room, you can cover the bed with a vinyl shower curtain or plastic tablecloth as a deterrent.

- You can help reinforce good habits by “reminding” the cat: picking them up and putting them in the litterbox at key times during the day - ie shortly after waking up from a nap, about 20 minutes after eating, after playing, plus any time that you notice they normally pee.

From an adopter whose kitten starting pooping outside of the box (after having the kitten in the bathroom for a week to retrain):

*"I really think the two things that helped the most was putting the litter box where he had accidents and not moving it for about a week. Then slowly moving it about a foot or so every couple days till it's where you want it. Also cleaning the floor very well with odor elimination stuff but also adding a scented cleaner after."*

## More Information:

Pam Johnson-Bennet

<http://www.catbehaviorassociates.com/category/litter-box-101/>

<http://www.catbehaviorassociates.com/some-common-reasons-why-cats-stop-using-the-litter-box/>

Jackson Galaxy

VIDEO: <http://jacksongalaxy.com/2014/08/18/cat-mojo-why-does-my-cat-pee-outside-the-litter-box/>

VIDEO:

<http://jacksongalaxy.com/2014/08/25/cat-mojo-litter-box-101-youre-setting-up-your-litter-box-wrong/>

Ten Litter Box Tips

The following tips are just that – tips. There is a deeper commitment to actually sharing space, that must happen before problems are solved. Remember, if your cat's litter box habits aren't exactly stellar, he is

raising a red flag, trying to tell you that all is definitely not right in his world. And it's your job, as the human who loves him, to make things right.

Put on your cat detective hat and let's think outside the box (and wish for inside)!

### **1. One box per cat +1**

Yes, the formula works. At the very least it gets you thinking outside of your comfort zone in regards to your relationship with litter boxes. If you have 3 cats, it's just not fair to ask them to share one box – and yes, I mean even if you're not experiencing any problems. Think of gang warfare, with members of both sides tagging the same wall with graffiti over and over. Cats often will compete for the important territorial resources in much the same way.

### **2. Detective work begins with a vet visit**

If your cat has suddenly stopped using the litter box ALWAYS rule out physical problems first. Avoidance of the box often begins with the feeling that, "every time I go to that place, it hurts me!" One way to tell if your cat is experiencing this unpleasant feeling is to notice what they do after they eliminate. Do they stay in the box, taking care of business by burying their waste, for instance? Or do they finish and RUN out of the box? In my experience the after-litter dash is a sign that they are running away from what made them painful.

### **3. Location, location, location**

The box must be located where it works best for the cat, not you. Compromise is a key ingredient in any human/cat relationship and this is where the rubber hits the road in that regard. The hands-down best place for a litter box is in an area that is socially significant to the cats. Sometimes that coincides with human areas of social significance. Think about the lesser of two evils. It's either a litter box where you don't want it, or pee where you definitely don't want it.

### **4. The smell of the litter**

It's so important to cater to what your cat is attracted to, and, likewise what they are repelled by. A safe bet is avoiding perfume-y, dusty litter. If it offends your nose when pouring it in the box, then think about the fact you have 5 million scent receptors while your cat has 200 million. What is annoying to you can be a source of avoidance for them. Fortunately, there are natural litters (such as one of my favorites, World's Best Cat Litter) where odor control is done...naturally!

### **5. The feel of the litter**

Likewise to the point about litter scent, different cats prefer different textures of substrate. Some cats (and especially those who have been declawed) can be very sensitive to the pointed nature of some crystal or pellet litters, or even just the jagged feel of many clay litters. When in doubt, go as soft as you can.

## **6. The volume of the litter**

It's true – different cats prefer different amounts of litter in their box. Take, for instance, an arthritic, older cat. When there is a full box of litter, you've created a scenario where, especially when pooping, the cat must "grip on" to the substrate to gain stability. That in itself, can cause discomfort.

## **7. The box itself**

Does your cat gladly enter the box or sniff around it, very carefully and gingerly going in as if she was exploring a very dark cave for the first time? Is your cat elderly or in any other way physically compromised and you are asking them to climb over a high-walled of the box? Overweight and expecting them to use a box big enough for a kitten? Remember, the box must be attractive and convenient; in other words, a friendly place.

## **8. To lid or not to lid?**

Keeping a lid on boxes is definitely something I tend to point away from. For one, the whole notion of a cat needing privacy in order to eliminate I believe is just a matter of projection; it's what I want so of course it's what he or she wants. Wrong. Sure some cats like to have lids on their box, but it can also cause inter-cat tension, especially when one cat gets bullied by another while in the box, and because of the lid, they never saw it coming. The same goes for Litter Liners – they are present just to make our lives a bit more convenient. Tell that to the cat who gets a claw stuck while trying to cover their waste! Just say no.

## **10. Angle of the box**

Now this might sound over-specific, but believe me it works – in our attempt to not have to even look at cat litter, we often place the box and face the box away from our eyes. That means having a box with a lid where the opening faces the wall or faces another corner. We want to do the opposite, especially in a multi-cat home. Anytime a sneak attack can happen, or even have a cat in the box get startled by anything, we know we've tilted the scale firmly in the human comfort direction. If the box is in a corner, face the opening on a diagonal so that from their vantage point they can see pretty much the whole room.

## **Bonus Tip**

### **11. Scoop. The. Litter.**

We complain about the smell, about having to look at the mess inside the box...and yet we avoid scooping like it was a trip to the DMV. Your cats don't like navigating the minefield of nasty clumps anymore than you like to see or smell it. So scoop that litter every day. Not twice a week