

Solving litter box issues

by Sonia Meadows, Kit-n-Kaboodle Pet Sitting Service

Inappropriate elimination is a tough problem to deal with and it can be a long process discovering what works for your kitty. He's trying to communicate with you in one of the only ways he knows how, so please be patient with your feline friend.

First and most importantly, if your cat suddenly stops using the box, it could very well signal a health problem. See your Vet and explain what's happening. With male cats, they may check for blockage of the urethra, which if left untreated is a very dangerous and possibly fatal condition. They will probably do a urinalysis to make sure there is no bladder or urinary tract infection or kidney issues. Often times the inappropriate elimination problem is solved with treatment.

If health issues have been ruled out, the cause is behavioral. There are two basic types of motivation for inappropriate elimination: territorial marking and issues with the litter box. If your cat is not spayed or neutered, this is another very good reason to do so. Territorial marking is reduced or eliminated in cats that are fixed. Occasionally if the cat hasn't been neutered until after sexual maturity, the habit of territorial marking has already developed. Stress can also trigger territorial behaviors. Territorial marking is often recognizable by urination on vertical surfaces like walls or furniture. The cat will back up to the surface and perform the deed with a tell-tale twitching of the tail. While this article focuses on litter box issues, some of the suggestions may help with territorial behaviors.

It's important to remove all traces of odor from the accident spots. A product called Zero Odor (www.zeroodorpet.com) or the enzymatic Nature's Miracle is recommended for this. Be sure to follow the label's directions.

Assuming there are no health issues, here is a list of things to try, arranged in order of their ease of implementation:

Does your litter box have a hood? If so, try removing it.

Do you feed your cat near the litter box? Try moving the litter box to a different room. Cats generally don't like to eat near their bathroom.

Is your litter box big enough for your cat? If your kitty is generously proportioned, try using a larger litter box or even a plastic storage container if you can't find a litter box large enough. If you do use one of those, provide a step or cut down a "doorway" to make it easy for the cat to enter.

Is it time to clean or replace the litter box? You should totally replace scoopable litter every 4 to 6 weeks. Plastic can retain odors, too. A mixture of baking soda and hot water can be left to soak in the box for a while before scrubbing. Whatever cleaner you use, be sure it is non-toxic and mildly or unscented. Avoid citrus scented cleaners.

Do you have enough litter boxes? There should be one box for each cat in the household. Sometimes even if you only have one cat, adding another box can solve the problem. Some cats just prefer to pee in one and poop in another. Don't place them right next to each other, as the cat registers that as one giant litter box.

If you have multiple cats, is there tension between the kitties? If so, try placing litter boxes in different rooms. If one cat (or the family dog) is threatening the other while it is using the litter box it can lead to problems. Also try a diffuser, described below.

Try using a cat pheromone diffuser or spray. There are two brands, one called "Feliway" and the other "Comfort Zone". You'll probably find the best price online. The diffusers are like the plug in air fresheners. They release pheromones that signal the calm and content part of the kitty's brain. You may need more than one diffuser as they have a limited range. Place one near the litter box and another in an area where the kitty spends a good deal of time. The spray form is useful if you find an accident. Use it after you have removed all urine odors from the spot. It is very important to follow the label's directions consistently with the use of these products. A study on the Feliway brand yielded these results in a month long test of 57 households: *"In one-third of households, urine marking stopped completely. In 57% of the households, urine marking was reduced and in 9.3% of households marking was unchanged."* Hunthausen, W. *Evaluating a feline facial pheromone analogue to control urine spraying. Veterinary Medicine, Feb 2000, p 151 - 155*

What kind of litter are you using? There are a couple factors to consider when it comes to litter:

1. Scent - Cats dislike most strong odors, which can be tricky for us humans, as we like to mask the litter box odor.

- *Scoop the box daily. Would you like to use a toilet full of waste?
- *Avoid citrus scented litters.
- *Try switching to an unscented litter.

There is a cat litter on the market called "Cat Attract" which does exactly what the name implies. It is available at most pet supply stores and online retailers. If the issue is resolved, you may try slowly switching back, adding regular litter to the Cat Attract over a few weeks.

2. Texture - Cat's paws are very sensitive. Studies have shown that they prefer the soft scoopable litter.

*Try switching to a litter with a larger or smaller grain size. Even among scoopable litters, there is a difference in the grain size so you may try switching to a different one. Some of the "low tracking" brands have a larger grain size.

*If you're using traditional clay litter, try switching to a scoopable litter.

Try "retraining" your cat. Confine the kitty in a large crate with a litterbox. When the cat consistently uses the litter box, place the kitty in a small room, such as a bathroom. Then a larger room, gradually working up to total access. This method can take a few weeks.

If none of these ideas work, consult with your Veterinarian about possible medications that may help. Amitryptiline and Cyproheptadine are just two of the possible medications that are used in the treatment of inappropriate elimination. With the advent of Pill Pockets treats and transdermal drug formulas which deliver the drug through a paste that you apply to the ear, medicating your kitty is a lot easier now. Most cats will acclimate to a daily pill or other form of medication.