

Cat Litter Box Mistakes That Owners Unknowingly Make

Do you know what type of litter cats consistently favor in studies? And which two scents they abhor? Chances are you're buying the 'wrong' type of litter, in your cat's eyes, at least. How to have a home that doesn't scream 'cat,' no matter what type you choose.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you've walked down the cat aisles in any store recently, you probably noticed a staggering number of litter choices. The most common types include clay (clumping and non-clumping), crystals, paper, pine, corn, wheat, walnut shells, and grass
- When it comes to litter preferences, cats don't go green. Studies show that most kitties prefer clumping litter that is unscented and contains no odor control additives
- The best way to control cat litter odor and encourage your kitty to use the box religiously is to keep his "bathroom" fastidiously clean

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These days, many people owned by cats suffer from kitty litter confusion, and it's no wonder. The number of cat litters on the market is mind-boggling, and the companies that sell the stuff work night and day to one-up each other with clever packaging and advertising strategies.

Gone are the days of sand and ashes in the cat box. Walk into your local grocery, big box or pet store, and you'll be faced with litters made from a wide variety of materials such as clay, corn, silica gel crystals, recycled paper, wheat hulls, walnut shells, and bark, to name just a few. There are also more than a few sizes, textures, and scents to choose from.

So what's a cat guardian to do... especially since kitties are notoriously picky about so many things, including the litter they prefer? My first rule of thumb is, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." If your cat is using the box like a champ, keep doing what you're doing. Obviously, your kitty approves not only of your litter selection, but also the box itself and its location.

However, if you are introducing a new cat to the family or you have a flexible cat who may be open to a litter change, picking eco-friendly, recycled, or sustainable products is obviously a good choice. Additionally, choosing a safe litter with low dust production is optimal.

Common Types of Cat Litter

- **Clumping clay** — This type of litter is typically made from bentonite, which is a highly absorbent clay that forms into solid clumps when your cat urinates. Clumping clay makes litterbox scooping and cleaning easy.

Drawbacks are that this type of litter is dusty, non-biodegradable, and heavy to cart around.

- **Non-clumping clay** — This type of litter is made from clays other than bentonite. It absorbs urine but doesn't form clumps, so it's easy to leave bits of moist litter behind when you scoop the box. This means it will start to get smelly sooner rather than later, and may require more frequent changing than clumping clay. However, non-clumping litter is often cheaper than clumping, and some cats prefer it.
- **Silica gel crystals** — The crystals are made of tiny silica gel beads similar to the desiccant found in the tiny pouches packaged as a preservative with foods, medications, and other products that can be damaged by excess moisture. Crystal litter is highly absorbent, controls odor well, and is almost dust-free. Some people even say it tracks less than other types of litter. Crystal litters are usually more expensive, but they tend to last longer. Downsides are that some cats don't like getting the crystals on their paws, and they can be dangerous if ingested in large amounts or over a long period of time, which happens when cats clean their feet.
- **Recycled paper** — This is litter made from recycled paper that is turned into pellets or granules. Paper is dust-free, highly absorbent, and biodegradable. In pellet form, the paper doesn't form urine clumps, but the granule form does.
- **Pine** — Pine litter is also recycled and is typically made from lumber scraps that are heat-treated to remove toxins, oils, and allergens from the wood. This type of litter comes in pellets, granules, or roughly crushed pine. It has a pine scent, which helps control odor. The granules and cobble (roughly crushed pine) are somewhat clumping, but in pellet form, the pine turns to sawdust that must be regularly replaced.
- **Corn** — Corn-based litter is biodegradable, absorbent, and provides odor control. However, since most kitties ingest a bit of litter each day during grooming, and since corn is a problem ingredient for pets, I recommend avoiding this type of litter.
- **Wheat** — Wheat litter is made from ground wheat. It clumps and provides odor control, is biodegradable, and is low on dust and tracking. Wheat can be another problem ingredient for cats, so I also suggest avoiding wheat-based litters as well.
- **Walnut shells** — This litter is made from crushed walnut shells and is dark brown in color. Walnut shell litters have clumping ability, offer excellent odor control, are highly absorbent, and biodegradable.
- **Grass** — Grass litter is new on the scene. One brand, Smart Cat, is a fine-grained litter made from USA-sourced grass fibers that is biodegradable, controls odor, and has good clumping ability. Another brand, The Touch of Outdoors by Dr. Elsey, uses USA-grown prairie grass.

Cats Prefer Unscented Clumping Litter

For those of us who would prefer to use an organic litter, this is a sad fact. In litter preference studies, cats consistently and significantly favor clay clumping litter made of very small granular (sand-like) material over large granule litter made with other types of substrates.

Kitties also have an aversion to litters with a floral or citrus scent, and since most of those litters are synthetic, my advice is to steer clear of scented litters altogether.

As you might guess, many cats are also averse to odor control additives, which most commercial litters contain – typically baking soda or activated charcoal (carbon). Given the option of one or the other, cats prefer carbon to baking soda. If you're concerned about litter box aversion, my suggestion is to select a litter with no odor control additives. This will give your kitty as natural an environment as possible in which to do his business. Alternatively, you can try a litter with a charcoal or carbon-based odor control additive.

If you have a cat who is eliminating outside the box and is free of any medical issues that might cause the behavior, I recommend providing several litter boxes representing a variety of options (different size boxes, placed in a variety of locations, with a variety of litter choices) so you can determine your kitty's preference. This is also a good approach when introducing a new cat or kitten to the family.

The small additional expense of trying out different options will be well worth it to solve litter box aversion problems and prevent future or potential house soiling.

Cat Litter Box Cleaning Regimen

Especially if you use unscented litter – and I can't stress this strongly enough – you must be disciplined about scooping the box. As in, twice a day scooping of all feces and urine clumps. I also recommend removing any litter stuck to the sides or bottom of the box with a damp paper towel. Dry the area thoroughly before scooping dry litter back over it. Keeping the sides and floor of the box clean and dry may help extend the time between full box clean-outs.

Dispose of all used litter and clean the box at least weekly. It's important to wash the container thoroughly to remove as much odor as possible so that your kitty does not become averse to using her litter box due to a lingering smell.

Wash the box with plain hot water. If you use soap, choose a natural, fragrance free variety. Avoid any cleaning product that is scented or contains potential toxins.

The secret to controlling cat box odor, for the benefit of all family members, including your kitty, is to keep the litter box in pristine condition.

Sources and References

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