

Are You Contributing to Your Cat's Litter Box Issues?

Elimination outside the litter box is the No. 1 reason why cats end up surrendered to shelters. Yet, it doesn't need to be that way. We owe it to our feline companions to get to the bottom of the issue before giving up. Discover the six most common litter box mistakes you may be making.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Elimination outside the litter box is the No. 1 reason why cats are surrendered to animal shelters
- If medical issues have been ruled out, litter box mistakes could be causing your kitty to seek out other places to do its business
- You should have a litter box for every cat in the house — plus one extra; offer a variety of fragrance-free natural litters with a depth of about 2 inches to see what your cat prefers
- Keep the litter box clean, scooping it once or twice a day and doing a deep cleaning about once a week
- Be sure to put a litter box on each level of your home, in a spot that's quiet, safe and easily accessible to your kitty

Elimination outside the litter box is the No. 1 reason why cats are surrendered to animal shelters. About 30% of all cats going into shelters are there due to litter box issues.¹ Their cleanliness is, after all, one of the characteristics that so many people love about their kitties.

"When there is a breakdown in this fastidious behavior and elimination occurs outside of the litter box or tray," Sarah Heath, a veterinary specialist in behavioral medicine, wrote in the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*, "the strain on the cat-owner bond and on human relationships within the household can be considerable."²

While no one wants to see their home routinely soiled, we owe it to our feline companions to get to the bottom of their litter box problems before giving up. In most cases, there's an underlying reason why your cat is peeing or pooping outside its litter box — and it's up to you to figure out what it is.

Sometimes, medical issues are to blame, which is why anytime a cat isn't using its litter box, you should see your veterinarian to rule out health problems. Urinary tract infections, hyperthyroidism, kidney disease and diabetes are just some of the health problems that may underlie litterbox problems in cats.^{3,4}

6 Common Litter Box Mistakes to Avoid

If your cat is healthy, the following litter box mistakes could be causing your kitty to seek out other places to do its business.

1. **Not enough litter boxes** — You should have a litter box for every cat in the house — plus one extra. So if you have one kitty companion, you'll need two litter boxes. For two kitties to be satisfied, plan on finding spots for three litter boxes. This allows your cats to choose which box they prefer, and ensures one is always free when your cat needs it.

Be sure the boxes are in separate locations, too. Otherwise, if you place two boxes side-by-side, your cat will think of them as one big box, negating the benefits of multiple boxes.

2. **Using the wrong litter** — Cats have preferences when it comes to different types of litter. Avoid scented litter, as the fragrance may be irritating to your cat. Then, try out a variety of litters, with different granule sizes and materials, to see what your cat prefers.

Just make sure to choose only 100% natural litters, with no chemical additives. Odor-absorbing crystals and similar synthetic materials may trigger respiratory problems or dermatitis in your cat.

How do you know if your cat likes its litter? If she jumps right in, digs around and covers her business with no issues, the litter is likely agreeable. However, if your cat steps in gingerly, perches on the edge or hops out quickly, she may prefer a different litter. In one study comparing clay granules, silica in microgranules, silica granules and wood pellets for litter, the clay substrate was the clear favorite.⁵

3. **Not cleaning it enough** — “[L]itter cleanliness plays a critical role in elimination behavior,” researchers wrote in the journal *Animals*,⁶ as evidenced by the fact that cats often use their boxes right after they've been cleaned. You should scoop the litter box at least once a day, preferably twice or after each use. About once a week, deep clean the box.

Dump out the used litter, clean the box with hot water and fragrance-free natural soap, then add fresh litter. Because plastic traps odor, replace the box every year or two.

4. **Putting the box in the wrong spot** — The litter box should be in a location where your cat frequents and feels safe. While you may be tempted to relegate the box to the most remote corner of the basement or garage, it should be in a spot that your cat can easily access.

This means placing one litter box on each level of your home.⁷ Choose a spot that's quiet, where your cat can use the box without being interrupted by children, other pets or any other unexpected visitors or loud noises.

5. **Not using the right litter box** — Just as cats have preferences about litter, they also prefer different types of litter boxes. You should experiment with covered and uncovered boxes, in different sizes. Studies suggest that cats tend to prefer covered litter boxes with larger surface areas,⁸ but the only way to know what your individual cat likes best is to give her several options to choose from and see if she gravitates to one over the others.

You can also try out a self-cleaning litter box, but be aware that some cats may be frightened by the noises or movement of these automated cleaners.

6. **Making the litter too shallow or too deep** — Another litter box variable is how deep to make the litter. This is another factor you'll need to experiment with to see what your cat prefers. Start with a depth of about 2 inches. Most cats don't like the litter to be any deeper than this, and some cats, particularly long-haired kitties, may prefer less litter or even the smooth surface at the bottom of the box.⁹

Avoid using litter box liners, as your cat's claws may get caught in them, causing an aversion. If you've tested

all these variables and your cat is still eliminating outside the box, stress could be a factor. Cats that eliminate outside of their litter boxes have significantly higher cortisol levels than those that do not, and is more common in indoor cats.¹⁰

Take steps to help your cat de-stress and provide plenty of **environmental enrichment**, including opportunities to go outdoors in a safe, supervised setting. In most cases, you'll be able to get to the root of your cat's inappropriate elimination and solve the problem together.

Sources and References

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