

Litter Box Behavior

Cats can be very communicative. Unfortunately for us, they generally do not communicate verbally, and certainly not in a language that we understand! So when a cat stops using the litter box, that is his way of letting us know that something is wrong. In order to determine if it's a medical problem or psychological problem, there are a few things you need to know.

When your cat stops using the litter box, have your veterinarian examine your cat to rule out any medical problems such as a urinary tract problem. If you notice your cat straining to urinate or defecate, he or she should be taken to the veterinarian immediately, as it could indicate a serious health issue. Once your cat's health has been cleared, it's time to look to other causes of litter box avoidance.

It is important to make sure your cat's litter box is in a location that allows for some privacy. Cats, like dogs, use association as a way to dictate behavior. If your cat has a bad experience while using the litter box, it can lead to unwanted behavior and inappropriate eliminating. For example, if your cat has been frightened by the noise of a barking dog or a large household appliance while in the litter box, he may find other places that are quieter or more private to relieve himself. Trapping your cat in the litter box in order to administer medication could also result in the same unwanted behavior. To guard against this, try to find a relatively private location for your cat's litter box and allow your cat the same privacy you would like when using the bathroom.

Remember, you do not want to use a toilet that hasn't been flushed – don't expect your cat to go in a litterbox that hasn't been scooped.

Another reason for your cat avoiding the litter box may be due to the number of cats in the household. Adult cats generally like to define their territory. Depending on the number of cats and the amount of space they have, territories can often overlap. This can cause territorial anxiety which may lead your cat to spray urine in order to mark his or her territory. Keep in mind, however, that the litter box can become part of a cat's territory, making it extremely important to have enough litter boxes for all the cats in the home. Cats in multiple cat households generally use more than one box, so having multiple boxes increases the likelihood that your cat is going to find a satisfactory one. A good general rule is to have one more litter box than the number of cats. For example, if you have three cats, you should have four litter boxes, if you have 5 cats, you should have six litter boxes, etc. If for space reasons you need to limit the number of boxes, have as many as you can and be sure to clean regularly, if not daily.

If you only have one cat and the litter box is in a quiet, private location, the solution could be as simple as changing the type of litter. Believe it or not, cats can be quite choosy about the litter they like. If you find a litter your kitty likes, **DO NOT** change it unless directed by your veterinarian for medical purposes. The litter box should be scooped daily and the entire box of litter should be changed once a week. When you change the litter, you should also wash the box with a mild soap and water and allow it to air dry. If a strong disinfectant like bleach is used, the lasting odor could deter your cat from using that box. If your cat is not using the litter box and the box has a cover, removing the cover can sometimes cure the problem. Many cats prefer the open air and find an enclosed box too confining, especially larger cats.

Hopefully these useful tips can help you find a solution to your cat's litter box avoidance problem. If you find that your cat is still not using the litter box after repeated attempts to resolve the problem, it might be reasonable to consult an animal behaviorist. Before doing this, however, it is best to contact your veterinarian for further assistance.