

Thinking Outside The Box

© San Diego Humane Society. All rights reserved.

Inappropriate elimination is the number one reason cats and kittens are relinquished to animal shelters. This is regrettable because taking a well thought-out, proactive approach could have helped to prevent many of these problems from arising in the first place. The vast majority of concerns that crop up with inappropriate elimination are usually environmental or household-based, rather than focused on the cat. With that in mind, it's important to consider potential problems *before* any actual inappropriate elimination occurs.



Like anything in life, it's always easier to prevent problems rather than attempting to "fix" a problem once it has begun. It's also important to understand that once a cat starts to eliminate outside her litter box, she might find it more convenient, comfortable or safe to continue to eliminate in this manner. For all of these reasons, it's always better to be proactive concerning litter box problems.

Make sure you consider your cat's point of view when looking to provide the optimum scenario for your cat's elimination habits. And remember, what works for one cat may not work for another. Be flexible and open to trying new things.

Covered or Uncovered?

When considering environmental or household-based factors, the litter box itself is always the first area of concern. Recognizing the potential for litter box problems starts with the type of box and litter, in addition to the location of the box.

Covered litter boxes seem like a nice solution to a messy problem, but many cats find them too confining and sometimes downright scary to enter. This is especially true if there is another cat in the household who might be ambushing the cat in question when she emerges from a covered litter box. Covered litter boxes are primarily for human convenience rather than for the cat's comfort, although it's true that some cats do like and even prefer them. If you have two cats and one prefers a covered box and the other an open box, it's suggested that you provide them with both. While some cats may find a covered box too confining, others enjoy the privacy it provides.

Many inappropriate elimination problems can be solved by simply taking the cover off the box; others are solved by adding a cover. It's up to you to play detective and figure out what your cat likes.

Automatic Boxes

If you're unable to keep up with scooping your litter box because of time or having a multi-cat household, you may want to consider investing in an automatic litter box. These boxes pay off in the long run if you have a fastidious cat who needs an absolutely clean box at all times. They are also great for keeping "snacking" dogs from helping themselves to a bit of "Kitty Roca" (feel free to say "ewww" now).

Be warned, however, some cats find the noise these boxes make to be scary. If you think your cat might fall into that category, don't waste your money. You will end up with an expensive and unusual looking flower planter.

Roll it, Baby!

Rolling litter boxes can be a decent cleaning solution for single cat homes. These boxes are covered and are designed to roll over, depositing all the litter clumps into a tray that can be easily dumped into the trash. If your cat doesn't like covered litter boxes, this is not a solution to try! Also, these boxes actually don't have much space inside so a large cat will have a hard time fitting into the box. If this happens, your cat may decide not to use it at all in favor of a more comfortable place, or you may develop a problem with a cat that "misses" the box by hanging out over the edge when she goes.

Color

Unlikely as it may seem, another consideration is litter box color. While cats see very little color, some seem to have a preference for boxes of certain colors. If this seems to be the case with your cat, indulge her! No one will mind if a pink litter box doesn't match the rest of your décor.

Size Matters

Consider your cat's body type to determine if your box might be too small for her to use reliably. It's important that your cat has plenty of room to stand and turn around in the box. If you notice your cat standing with her paws on the outside or the edge of the box, it's time to get a larger box.

Height is also a factor. Kittens may have a hard time climbing into a tall-sided box. Tall boxes also present problems for old or injured cats where mobility and pain issues may prevent clambering over the side. Again, when it's difficult to get in, cats often choose somewhere else more convenient and comfortable. An easy solution is to cut one side a bit lower so it is easier for your cat to get in and out.



Location, Location, Location

The first rule for litter box placement is that access must be easy! If your cat has to climb up or down a flight of stairs, or venture into a cluttered room to find her box, she may decide it's easier to use the carpet or couch where she normally spends her time. This is especially true for older or ill cats, those new to your home or shy cats that may find it scary making such a trek.

The litter box should also be away from too much noise and activity, and away from her food. Many cats like privacy. If regularly startled or interrupted when trying to use the box, a cat may decide to find a quieter, calmer location to do her business. This is why laundry rooms, hallways and similar noisy or high-traffic areas may not cut it for many cats. When she's unhappy, she will seek out real estate that's more desirable to her. This may translate into the back of your closet or behind your couch. To prevent this, considering a litter box location that you find less than ideal may be necessary.

Number of Boxes

The general rule is that there should be one litter box per cat plus one extra box. These boxes should ideally be located in different places. Each box should also have multiple routes for approaching and leaving so other cats are not able to stage an ambush.



Obviously, not everyone needs to follow this rule. Each cat is different in her preferences. However, some cats insist on having one box to urinate in and one box to defecate in. In multi-cat households, some cats may refuse to use a box that the other one has already used.

Litter Type and Texture

There are so many litter options on the market that a decision on what is best for your cat may be difficult. Remember though, the decision really does revolve around your cat, not around whether you want the litter to smell like artificial flowers or look like diamonds. Cats are very picky about scent and texture and what appeals to you may send your cat running. The best way to decide is to let your cat do it for you. This will mean experimenting with a couple different types of litter. It's extremely important that you find the brand that your cat likes to avoid problems later. If necessary, it's worth spending a little extra now to avoid paying for steam cleaning later!

Once you find something your cat likes, be sure to stick to it. Cats are creatures of habit and following the "what's on sale this week" method of buying litter will most likely be unsuccessful. Save yourself the headache and stick to what works.

Clay Litters

Clay litters are the time-honored choice of most cat parents. These are fine and many cats prefer this type of product. Considerations for your cat when choosing a clay litter are both textures and scented agents that are added to help with odor control. Some cats like the soft, sandy litters while others like the grittier ones. Some don't mind odor control agents while others turn their tails up at scented litter. These will all be factors in making a good choice for your cat.

If you adopted your cat from a shelter, it's helpful to find out what litter they used and if it was successful.

Clumping Litters

These are very popular and like clay litter, they come in several textures and scents. It's important to scoop the clumps as they happen or the "rock-like" products may discourage your cat from using the box. Again, these are convenient for us but every consideration should be made to find a product that your cat likes.

Pearl or Crystal Litters

Many veterinarians and behaviorists tell people to shy away from the pearl or crystal-type litters. Some cats eat them (especially kittens) and the popping and hissing sounds the litter makes when absorbing urine can frighten cats enough to stay away from the box altogether!

Newspaper

Unless your cat has a medical problem, do not use newspaper. Most cats don't like using it.

Specialty Litters

Some products include wheat hull litters or pine litters. These products may satisfy your cat's preference for texture, but they're more expensive and are produced by small companies with limited availability, especially if you move to a new location where they're not available. Keeping in mind that it's best to select a product you will keep using long-term, it's better to settle on one of the more traditional brands, if possible.

Litter Box Liners

Box liners are fine as long as you make sure they fit tightly and there is enough litter in the box to thoroughly cover the plastic. If not, your cat may become accustomed to eliminating on plastic and may choose other hard, slick items in the house to “go,” such as linoleum floors or bathtubs (giant litter box – what fun!).

On the flip side, if your cat is not used to or doesn’t like eliminating on slick surfaces (it can feel slippery and unstable to your cat) and you don’t use enough litter to cover the liner, she may decide to go somewhere softer and more appealing. Options may include clothing left on the floor or bedding.

Cleaning the Box

Everyone has witnessed his or her cat jumping right into the freshly cleaned litter box to eliminate. This serves as testimony that cats love a clean litter box. What you may not know is that *how* you clean the litter box is just as important as *when* you clean. Contrary to what seems logical, it’s better to avoid strong cleaning products such as bleach or Lysol (which is a toxin to cats). Rather, use plain hot water. If you must use a cleanser, pick a gentle, natural product such as Simple Green. Even when using a gentle cleaning product, make sure you rinse the box thoroughly so the scent doesn’t linger. Cats don’t like citrus-scented products, so avoid using cleansers with these scents.

Litter Box Maintenance

It’s important to keep the box scooped daily. With some cats, it’s necessary to clean even more frequently! Depending on the number of cats using the box, litter should be replaced often enough so no wet litter is left sitting in the box from overuse.

Replace the boxes themselves on a regular basis. If you see an accumulation of gook on the bottom, it’s time for a new box. Most boxes will need to be replaced on average every couple of years.

For your own health and safety, don’t dump litter into gardens or your yard. Used litter may contain parasites that will not be killed by outside temperatures. Always dispose of litter in a trash receptacle.

Don’t clean litter boxes where you prepare food! You can use your bathtub, but be prepared to scrub down that area with a bleach solution when you’re done. If you have one, a laundry sink is a great area for this task. Also, flushing litter down the toilet is not a good idea. Even the “flushable” types of litter can clog older pipes, so it’s best to dump the clumps in the trash.



Household Changes

Cats acclimate to routines and become very unsettled when changes take place. New people moving into the house or people moving out can upset a cat greatly. Even something minor to you, such as rearranging furniture, can be unsettling to a cat. This doesn’t mean you can’t do these things, just be sensitive and watch for any negative reactions.

Moving

Moving is very stressful for cats! Unless your cat is essentially bomb-proof, it’s a good idea to restrict your cat to a single room when you first move with all her supplies, including the litter box. Remember not to place the box and the food right next to

one another. Gradually increase your cat's space until she has free roam of the house. Allowing immediate access to the entire home can sometimes mean your cat will not know where to find her litter box, or if there were other cats previously in the home (especially if they ever had accidents) your cat may go where they went, rather than where you would like her to go.

Predicting Litter Box Problems

A good way to gauge how your cat may react in new situations is to consider her behavior when new people enter your home for a visit. Does she approach calmly and confidently? Does she run away at first but come out after a bit? Does she hide the entire time people are there? If your cat tends to hide for long periods of time when guests are over, there's a good chance she could stay hidden from new situations for so long that she might not make it to the litter box. This is a cat that should be put in a smaller area with clear access to food, water and a litter box when a new situation arises (moving house, new people moving in, etc.). If your cat is more secure with new people and situations, she's less likely to hide and have accidents in an unfamiliar circumstance.

Roly-Poly Kitties

Some overweight cats have a hard time maneuvering in and out of a litter box. Solutions include a lower box and helping your cat lose some weight (please check with your vet on the best way to start a weight-loss program). Large cats may also have difficulty using a small box, so make sure that you provide an amply-sized box.

Geriatric and Sickly Cats

Older cats and cats with back/leg problems can have difficulty getting in and out of a box. Again, a lower box is recommended. You can cut the opening lower if needed or even use a baking sheet if the cat needs a very low edge.

Leaving Cats Alone

Many people choose cats as pets because they are "low maintenance." This often means people go away for a weekend or even a week, leave lots of food and water and hope that the cat will be okay until they get back. There are some important *what-ifs* to consider in these situations:

What if your cat decides her litter box has gotten too dirty to use?

What if your cat is in her only litter box and something frightening happens (a car backfires outside, sirens go by, etc.)? She may be so frightened that it will associate the location with this negative experience.

It's best to have a friend, family member, neighbor or cat sitter check on your cat daily, clean the litter box and adhere to the regular daily feeding routine. It's a good idea before you leave on your trip to invite your cat-sitter over for a couple visits so your cat has a chance to get to know them.

Other Cats

If cats don't get along, it can definitely affect litter box use. For instance, if one cat stalks the other, the stalked cat may feel she is unable to get to the box or ambushed when she tries to use it. Know your cats and their interactions. Some may prefer being able to see what's coming when they use the box while others may





prefer the security of being concealed when they go. Cats outside your home may also have an effect on your cat's litter box habits. Sometimes just seeing cats through the window can trigger episodes as well.

If you have an unaltered male cat, females in heat outside of your home may cause your cat to spray to mark his territory.

What to do?

Management! Restricting a cat's space – especially if she's nervous or is bothered by another cat – can lower the chances of accidents. For the litter box itself, you can increase the number of boxes, try a different litter, box style or location. You can also try Feliway pheromone spray to help your cat become calmer and not feel the need to scent mark.

In addition, call San Diego Humane Society's Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 (x2244) for additional help!

Conclusion

Any sudden problem should *always* be evaluated by a vet first to make sure there are no underlying medical issues. A trip to your veterinarian should also always be the first course of action if any behavior is new, whether litter box problems, dramatic changes in appetite, activity level, sleeping patterns or distinct behavioral changes.

Lastly, it's important to assess your expectations. It's a given that at some point in her life, every cat will have an incident of inappropriate elimination. This is not necessarily a daily part of living with cats, but things can be damaged, broken or soiled occasionally. Please try to keep such instances in perspective and appreciate all the wonderful attributes your cat has.

It's also important to be proactive in limiting these problems by providing your cat with all the necessary equipment, training, management and love to ensure minimal damage while keeping your relationship intact and healthy through the years.

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.