

Inappropriate Elimination

Most cats instinctively use a litter box, but in some cases, they have had something happen that caused them to use other places to eliminate. The first thing to do is always rule out a medical reason for this behavior. Once your cat is medically cleared, you can move on to behavioral reasons for not using the box. Thankfully, there are many positive and proactive things you can do to encourage reliable use of the litter box in your home.

Aversion to the box itself

Many cats will choose not to use a box they feel is not up to snuff, so you can do many things to ensure it is a happy safe place for your new kitty. The most important thing is to keep it clean- for some cats this means scooping it out after each time the cat uses it, others will be happy with once a day. Changing the litter entirely every 4-5 days can also help with many cats. Other things to consider when it comes to avoiding the box are:

Location, location, location!: Where you place the box will often dictate success. Make sure it is in a place that is quiet (not next to the washing machine or other loud appliances), secure (not where the dog can stick his nose in) and is a clean spot. When choosing where to leave the litter box, think about it from the cat's perspective, keeping in mind that they are very sensitive to vibrations, sounds, smells and feeling safe (ensuring they can see what is coming around the corner). Easy access is important also, so having a box on every floor in the home can be helpful.

Type of Box: Some cats do not feel safe in a covered box or may prefer a larger box to use. Older cats with joint issues will need a box with a lower lip to make climbing in easier on them. Automatic boxes are often very scary for cats because they make weird and seemingly random noises. Finding the right box for your cat may take a couple of tries, but once it is determined your cat will be grateful.

Number of Boxes: A great rule of thumb is 1 box per cat plus an extra, so if you have 2 cats there should be 3 boxes. For 1 cat 2 boxes may be needed if they like to use one box for urinating and the other for defecating.

Litter preferences: A very clean box is the first step, but the litter may also be important. Most cats like a clumping litter but you may need to play around to find the litter that your cat likes the best. Also you can play with depth of litter, for instance Persian cats tend to like no more than an inch of litter in the box (it gets caught in the fur between their toes). Stay away from scented litters and the crystals that make noise.

Cleaning any accidents well

If your cat does have an accident outside of the box it is important to clean the area well. Animals can be highly motivated to continue to soil spots that smell like urine or feces so using an enzymatic cleaner will properly clean the area. Keep in mind that the cat did not make this accident out of spite or because they are mad at you. Just clean up well and think about why the accident happened. Finally, don't punish the cat for mistakes, just clean them well. Punishing the cat will likely make the issue worse.

Substrate preferences

Many cats will choose different surfaces for one or both types of elimination. Bedding, carpets, furniture and other soft surfaces are often favorites. Other common spots are cool and smooth to the touch like showers, sinks, linoleum and tile. Finally, some outdoor cats will prefer soil and grass if that is what they are used to using. You can make the litter box more appealing by making it resemble these surfaces. For cool/ smooth surface preferences only fill half of the box with litter and leave the other half flat and smooth. For outdoor history you can place sand/ soil in the box and slowly transition this to litter by mixing them. Many cats love to dig so providing them with a litter they can dig in that does not clump on the hairs on their feet is always advisable.

Stress

It is also important to make those places that you would prefer the cat not use to be less appealing to them. For soft surfaces you can place a sheet of plastic over it, aluminum foil, double-sided tape on top or a citrus soaked cotton ball near the favored spot. For smooth surfaces you can leave a bit of water in the tub or sink, double-sided tape or other unpleasant offering on the spot.

While many times a cat will use the box once it is a clean, appropriate and safe place for them a very common reason for inappropriate elimination is STRESS! If a cat is happy and content in the home they will most likely use a litter box. There are many reasons a cat can be stressed and they are very good at hiding what stresses them out. Not using the litter box can be a good indication that something is making the cat unhappy. Addressing common stressors is key and some of these include:

- Other pets
- Young kids
- Loud noises
- Loss of a bonded animal or person
- Moving
- Outside cats in the windows
- Changes in the home

Medication

If you have done all you can to make the box a great place to be and reduced their stress as much as possible you can talk with your vet about using anti-anxiety medication to help your cat use the box. Many common medications can be used for this issue and often help greatly.

Taking home a cat with a history of not using the box:

The following are some steps you can take to ensure a successful transition into your home with your newly adopted cat.

Confinement

- Please confine your cat to a small, easy to clean room such as a bathroom for at least the first week after adoption. Keep the cat here until he or she is fully relaxed, eating, sleeping and playing on a regular schedule. This will not only give your cat time to adjust to the new surroundings, but any accidents will be easy to manage.
- After the cat has relaxed and is eating, sleeping and using the box reliably you begin to let your cat out around the rest of your house. It is a good idea to continue to confine him or her at night or other times when you cannot directly supervise until they are completely transitioned into the new home. You will need a litter box in the confined space and another in the final location you will keep the box.
- If you want your cat to sleep in the bedroom with you, consider a large dog crate with comfortable blankets, a clean litter box, and some water.

Supervision

Supervise your cat when he or she is out and about. If you see your cat start to eliminate inappropriately you can gently move him or her to a litter box. Your cat should only be allowed access to the whole house when supervised until you see repeated, consistent use of the litter box.

Encouragement

Keep the litter box clean, and consider several litter boxes to choose from. Avoid very smelly litters like Feline Pine. You can purchase a product called Cat Attract, which is a litter designed to be as attractive as possible to cats who have problems using the litter box reliably. You can also ask to go home with some soiled litter from your cat's box at the shelter. This way their new litter box already smells like them when they get to their new home.

Time

While it's exciting to bring a new cat home, an extended period of confining and supervising will mean greater success in the long run. Set your cat up for success by not moving faster than he or she is ready for! Your cat will thank you!