

Litterbox Problems and Solutions

Excerpts from Litterbox Secrets By [Jean Hofve DVM](#) and Jackson Galaxy

When your cat avoids the litterbox it is not done out of spite, anger, or frustration. *While it is not impossible for a cat to bear a grudge, it is not a typical reason for not using the box.*

Is It Medical?

It's common for cats to communicate with urine and/or feces to advertise stress, pain, or that they don't feel well. That's why the first step in an analysis of litterbox problems includes a trip to the veterinarian, including a thorough physical, and examinations of urine, stool, and/or blood, plus any other tests the vet feels are necessary. If your vet does not recommend urinalysis and/or blood work, does not check teeth, ears, entire body of your cat, request it.

We don't want to mistake a physical problem for a behavioral one, and fail to take the steps needed to help the cat heal. A veterinary exam will help keep costs and time invested to a minimum. Any pain could lead to litterbox avoidance including but not limited to: tooth infections, kidney infections, paw pain, urinary tract infection, diarrhea, and constipation.

Is It the Litterbox?

The litterbox itself is one of the main reasons cats avoid using it. Let's concentrate on the physical properties of the litterbox.

Consider the size of your cat(s)

A cat needs to feel a sense of space in his place; that is, room to turn around, to cover what they've eliminated, to choose one corner over another. Often, if they feel their bodies hitting the sides of the box (especially bigger or long haired cats), they will simply choose a place that affords them more "elbow room," and that usually means a place that we deem inappropriate. Think outside the box when looking for bigger boxes, large Rubbermaid containers make excellent litterboxes.

To hood or not to hood?

A hooded litterbox is nice for people. It contains the smell and hides the business that takes place there. It has the opposite effect for many cats. That hood that contains the smell makes the interior of the box a stinky place to be. It smells in there and your fastidious cat may not want to enter that space. Secondly, when in the litterbox your cat can't see anything approaching from the peripherals. It makes the litterbox an excellent place for an ambush, if you have multiple cats and there is hierarchical problems in the house, a hooded litterbox is a no-no. It will only exasperate the inter-cat relations. Finally a hooded litterbox adds to the enclosed feeling, making a cat that needs elbow room feel extra confined.

Silver liners?

Cat pan liners are a convenience for the guardian. Some cats hate them. If you are using them and your cat is avoiding the box, ditch the liners.

Is It the Litter?

Although surface preferences usually develop early in life, cats can change suddenly later for reasons we don't always fully understand. We can only try to cater to these preferences, often by trial and error. If you're changing things with the litterbox, do it slowly and over the course of many weeks (if it's a new litter, mix it in, bit by bit).

Kinds of litter

The choices seem limitless: Clay, scoopable, newspaper, corn-based, wheat-based, granules, pearls, crystals, scented, non-scented....Cats themselves evidently prefer soft, since the majority of substrate preference problems we see are for soft surfaces like bath mats, bedding, and clothing. This may mean that a change from regular clay litter, pellets, or 'crystals' to a sandier, scoopable litter is in order. Cats who are used to eliminating outdoors and are in the process of being retrained to an indoor litterbox might even prefer garden dirt or potting soil. One caution: clay and scoopable litters are dusty, and may contribute to asthma or other respiratory problems. Corn and wheat-based litters, or pelleted types, are the least dusty. Of the scoopable clay litters, Dr. Elsie's Precious Cat Litter and Tidy Cats are the least dusty. Adding Cat Attract additive to your litter can also help encourage your kitty to choose the litterbox for elimination.

Depth of litter

From experience and the expertise of other behaviorists and knowledgeable guardians who have been down the path of trial and error, cats prefer the "less is more" philosophy when filling their box. Add enough so that they can cover and dig, but not enough so that their paws actually sink in into the substrate—about 1-1/2 to 2 inches. There is also the human misconception that the

more litter, the less stinky. If you live with multiple cats especially, you know what a large fallacy that one is. The ammonia odor in cat urine, despite the best marketing campaign of the litter manufacturer, is strong!

Older cats may have issues with pain that impact their use of the litterbox. A recent study found that 90% of cats over 12 years of age had signs of arthritis that were visible on radiographs (x-rays), many of them severe. Less litter provides a more stable surface that may be more comfortable for those creaky old joints.

Frequency of scooping and cleaning

If you've chosen a scoopable litter, it is important to remove waste daily, as the primary clumping agent, sodium bentonite, absorbs moisture and greatly enhances the size of the waste, decreasing the availability of free space in the box. Even with non-clumping litter, cats like the feeling of picking their own spot, circling it, digging a shallow space for it, and burying it—we want to leave plenty of room.

Strange as it may seem, we can actually overdo cleaning the box. We often claim in the name of fastidiousness, that boxes need to be spotless daily. That may not be true. For some cats, the comforting presence of their own scent is important in maintaining good litterbox habits. However, if your cat is having box problems and you're not cleaning the box regularly, a thorough cleaning is the first order of business.

There is also a difference between necessary removing of waste daily, and cleaning the box. In general, litterboxes do not need a deep cleaning (dumping all the litter and washing the box) more than once every three or four weeks. Hot water and soap are adequate for cleaning. Stay away from heavy-duty cleansers like Pine-Sol, Lysol, or ammonia as their strong odors may actually cause aversion.

Scented/Non-scented litter

Non-scented is best, especially if there is a lid on the box. Remember what the cat has to deal with in those close confines, and don't add another complication! Many cats seem to dislike the strong perfume of some litters.

The Declaw Factor

Declawed cats may choose softer surfaces over the coarse feel of litter. Newly declawed kittens or cats may instantly make an association between the pain in their paws and the litter. But pain in declawed paws can develop after years of walking around with improper foot structure, leading to litterbox avoidance years after being declawed. If your declawed cat is avoiding the litterbox and none of the suggestions above are working, some additional things to try are: empty litterboxes, litterboxes with puppy pads in them, litterboxes with just newspaper, half litter/half empty litterbox (take a litterbox, put a thin layer of litter on the bottom, then tip the box so that all the litter goes to one half of the box and set the box back down flat). Also be sure to minimize the stress in your kitty's life.

Is It a Social Issue?

If there are multiple cats in the home, litterbox issues can be a result of a turf war. Step 1, add more litterboxes. Step 2, add more litterboxes. Make sure the litterboxes are in accessible locations with multiple avenues of escape. The area around the litterbox is an excellent place for ambush and you want to give your stressed out kitties as many options as possible. Put the litterboxes on top of the places where the inappropriate elimination has been occurring. They can be slowly moved to a better place once your cat is reliably using the box. Make sure all your cats are fixed. All those hormones can drive marking behaviors.

Stress Relief

No matter what the issue is, when the litterbox is avoided, there is always stress being felt. In addition to the steps above, steps should be taken to relieve some of the stress your kitty is clearly feeling. Ways to relieve stress:

Play Therapy: Get them moving, get them tired, burn off some of that stressful energy. We love Go Cat products (Da Bird and Cat Catcher are favorites) for stimulating energetic play.

Elevate your cat, literally: Make a place for your kitty to go that is up high (cat trees, shelves, etc) and encourage them to explore those spaces (treats, toys, etc). Not using the cat tree, make sure it's a solid structure in an attractive location.

Smaller space: Sometimes a big house can be overwhelming. Try confining kitty to a single floor or room until the litterbox problems are resolved. Be sure they get plenty of time to hang out with their people. Confining kitty alone will only add stress and make the situation worse.

Some excellent stress relieving products include: Feliway Plug-In, NurtureCalm or Lavender Collars, Rescue Remedy.

It is also important to make sure you are cleaning up with an enzymatic cleaner (such as Fizzion, Anti-Icky Poo, Natures Miracle) or the cat will be drawn to the same places again and again.