

Litter Box Solutions

Can litter box problems be solved?

Yes! Sadly, however, litter box issues are the number one reason people surrender their cats to shelters. Many cat guardians see this behavior as permanent rather than modifiable. Keep in mind that as frustrating as may be for you, this problem is generally very easy to remedy. The first step is to determine why your cat is not using his litter box.

Why do cats stop using their litter boxes?

When a cat that has previously been consistent in using his litter box begins to pee or poop outside the box, pay attention. There can be a variety of reasons.

Medical problems: Your cat's inappropriate urination may be his way of letting you know that he isn't feeling well. The behavior could be the result of urinary tract inflammation or infection (UTI). These are serious conditions that may result in death if not treated in a timely manner. These can be difficult to recognize. The only way to find out if your cat has a medical issue is to take him to your veterinarian.

Not cleaning the litter box frequently enough: First and foremost, cats like a clean litter box. Cat noses are far more sensitive than ours. They are fastidious creatures and like their bathroom to be as clean as we like ours. Most cats prefer clumping, unscented litter that is scooped twice a day. Clay is their preferred substance. The golden rule is one litter box per cat plus one. If you are using non-clumping litter, the box should be completely emptied at least every other day. Boxes should be washed with unscented soap every 3 – 4 weeks.

Box is too small: Cats like large spacious litter boxes that allows their tails to easily hang over the edge. They want to be able to dig a hole, turn around and cover their pee or poop without coming into contact with pee or poop, or the side of box. Many do not like top entry boxes, covered boxes, automatic boxes, or boxes that are enclosed in a closet or cupboard.

Response to stress: Inappropriate elimination is often a response to stress. Although it can have a variety of causes, stress tends to be the result of some type of change in environment. A change that may seem insignificant to you can have a magnified impact on a sensitive feline.

A new addition to the family: Whether human, feline or canine, a new addition to the family is a change in your cat's daily life. Make sure your cat feels safe and everyone in the household gives your cat lots of affection so he doesn't feel the need to act out.

A change in litter or location of the litter box: Cats are creatures of habit and changing their "comfort station," particularly moving it to a place where the cat feels vulnerable or has had a negative experience, may be the reason he is seeking other places to express himself. If your cat likes a particular litter, keep using it. Changing litters frequently or purchasing what is on sale this week can cause problems.

Why do cats mark their territory?

If your cat is urinating in high-traffic areas or near windows and doors, he may be marking his territory. Although marking is most common in male cats that haven't been neutered, both female and neutered male cats can potentially mark. Cats often mark to signal ownership of an area or to advertise sexual availability. Marking could be a response to the presence of other felines, or other animals, either in the house or outside, and is more likely to occur when a cat feels threatened or stressed.

How do you modify the behavior?

- Take your cat to the vet for a thorough medical check to rule out any urinary tract medical issues.
- Make sure his litter box is cleaned regularly (2X/day), not enclosed and is 1 ½ times the length of the cat.
- It's essential to thoroughly clean every place where your cat has urinated inappropriately to keep him from thinking that these are new acceptable places to "go." Several cleansers are available that completely remove the smell of urine. Look for ones that mention enzymes for pet stains on the label.
- Consider what environmental factors may be causing him stress.

Please contact us at Marin Humane at 415.506.6284 or CatBehavior@MarinHumane.org to discuss your cat's litter box problem and what may be causing it. There are many ways to help your cat to consistently use his litter box and we will help you find the best solution. This is our most common call and we are experts in resolving litter box issues!

Behavior Resources:

Marin Humane's [Behavior & Training](#) department conducts various cat workshops. Sign up on our [Cat Behavior](#) (MarinHumane.org/oh-behave/cats) page for the next available class series. We also have **Cat Behavior Consultants** who are available for consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6284 or CatBehavior@MarinHumane.org.

More information about cat behavior is available by clicking [here](#) or on our website at <https://marinhumane.org/oh-behave/cat-handouts/>.

