

SOLVING LITTERBOX PROBLEMS IN CATS

By Susan Carney

Ask yourself these questions:

First: Is there anything wrong with your cat, medically?

Only your vet can answer this, so get on the phone and make an appointment. Before trying to diagnose a “litterbox problem” in any cat, always consult with your veterinarian to be sure the cat does not have a medical problem. Often medical problems such as a urinary tract infection can cause your pets’ behavior to change. If there is not a medical condition present then follow the tips below to find a solution.

Second: What has changed recently in your life?

- Is the cat new to your home?
- Did you add an additional new cat or other pet?
- Have you moved?
- Did you move the litterbox?

If nothing has changed then we can fall back on the three most common reasons why cats “decide” not to use a litterbox:

1. **Location Preference** – This would mean that where you have decided to place the litterbox is not where the cat prefers to “go.” Yes, even if the box has been there for years, all of a sudden Fluffy may say, Sorry I wish to “go” elsewhere.

Take a good look at the location of your cat’s litterbox. Have you moved it recently, is it a high traffic area or is it easy for the dog to harass your cat while it is using the litterbox?

First, clean the area where the cat has been eliminating. Your best bet: a specific animal odor remover and cleaner like *Natures Miracle** can be used at the site to eliminate stains and odor. DO NOT STEAM CLEAN RUGS. Steam cleaning only sets in the odor and maybe even the stain.

Second, move the litterbox to a quieter location preferably the location that the cat has been peeing or pooping. Then, gradually move the box several inches every day until the box and the cats’ behavior is where you want it.

As you move the box you will want to make the area that you do not want the cat to use less appealing. Natures Miracle cleaner will do this but, also adding a few treats in a small bowl will help. No one likes to eat where they “go.”

2. **Surface (type of litter) Preference** - As cats get older their preferences can change. Litter comes in all shapes and sizes and a lot of it can irritate your cat: smell, size, color and texture.

You can try changing the type of litter you use, but remember, do not change too much too quickly.

Some alternatives for you:



For cats that pee on linoleum or hard wood, less litter allows them to dig to the bottom of the box...creating a similar surface and providing just enough litter to cover what they have done. You will have to clean the box more but it is worth it.

Softer litter – sandy scoopable litter is easier and feels better to some cats. Hey – you can even flush some brands (if you have the right plumbing)

Perfumed litter – Often the additives are just too much for a cat's great sense of smell. Basic plain clay litter works great for these cats.

3. **Fear of the litterbox** – Did something happen near the litterbox that made it scary? If your cat had a bad experience while using the litterbox you may need to change everything...Get a new box, and change the location.

Fear is a big deterrent for many cats. If you have more than one cat add another box so the fearful cat can build new experiences. If you have a dog, you can baby gate the room off so just the cats can get over or under the gate.

If you have a hood on the box (a covered box) try removing it. Often a large cat will hit their head or just may never have seen a hood before. You can leave it near by for the cat to explore and hopefully adjust to but remember, changes take time and every cat is different.

OK, now let us get back to the questions you need to ask yourself. If you can answer yes to any of those questions at the beginning of this article then the solution should be easy:

- **Is the cat new to your home?**

A yes to this question means that your new cat is still in transition and may need just a bit more time. Most cats do not feel comfortable, or at home, in a new environment for 6 months to 1 year. A smooth easy transition to a new home is key to creating harmony and the behavior you want.

A few solutions:

If your cat is new it may simply be too frightened to wander back to the box or not quite know where it is yet. Give your new pet time and show it where the litterbox is a few times a day. In addition, be sure that the litterbox is not in some far off corner of a dark basement. Try keeping all of your new cats' "stuff" on one floor (food dishes, litterbox, and pet bed).

You may want to consider leaving your cat in a room with the box while you are away during the day... This will prevent the cat from wandering the house and, out of fear, deciding to "go" in a spot that is "easy to get to." However, do not confine the cat for weeks at a time. Cats are very different from dogs and require a different approach and long-term confinement should be a last resort.

If fear is not a factor, find out what type of litter the cat is used to, the cat's previous owner or the adoption agency where you got the cat will know the answer. Check your paperwork for information. A cat's preference can stay with them for a lifetime.

- **Did you add an additional new cat or other pet?**



Do not expect a new cat to share with an existing cat. Just because you want them to share, does not mean they agree. Peeing where another cat pees (especially one you just met) can be seen as territorial aggression or a challenge. A good rule to live by - **Add a cat = Add a box!**

Solution:

Simply get another litterbox and place it far enough apart so each cat can choose the one they prefer and in time the cats may choose to use one or you may just be stuck with double duty.

- **Have you moved?**

Often the lingering odor of previous cats can be present in a new home. You may need to use an animal odor eliminator on your rugs or common animal areas. Remember to avoid steam cleaning and get yourself some Natures Miracle.* It is the best thing we have found.

A few other solutions:

A great product called FELIWAY* will synthetically “mark” the territory for your new cat. Assisting with spraying, peeing and overall anxiety. You can get this at any pet store or the NHSPCA.

- **Did you move the litterbox?**

Every time you make a change to your environment, you may need to consider how it will affect your cat.

Solutions:

Put the litter box back if you moved it. Show your cat that you did put it back and wait for one week of consistent good litterbox use before you decide to move it again (that is, if you must move it). Then move the litterbox several inches at a time every few days or weeks until it is where you want it.

Remember most importantly that punishment is not a solution: It is rare that you will be able to catch the cat in the act of eliminating outside the litterbox, making it very difficult to punish on a consistent basis. In addition, as we all know, inconsistent punishment is not effective, nor is punishment after the fact. Both can make the problem much worse. As always, feel free to **call us 603-772-2921 Ext. 112**

