



BEHAVIOR  
SERIES

# Solving Litter Box Problems

**IF YOU'RE HAVING A HARD TIME** persuading your cat to head for the litter box when it's appropriate, it may be time to draw a line in the sand. Most cats prefer eliminating on a loose, grainy substance, which is why they quickly learn to use a litter box. But when their preferences include the laundry basket, the bed, or the Persian rug, you may find yourself with a difficult problem. By taking a closer look at your cat's environment, you should be able to identify factors that have contributed to the litter box problem and make changes that encourage your cat to head for the litter box once again.

A common reason why cats don't use the litter box is an aversion to the box, such as dislike of a covered box or dissatisfaction with the depth of the litter. Two other common reasons your cat may avoid the litter box are a preference for a particular type of litter not provided in the box or a preference for a particular location where there is no box.

Sometimes the problem is a combination of all three factors. To get to the answer, you'll need to do a little detective work—and remember, the original source of the problem may not be the reason it's continuing. For example, your cat may have stopped using the litter box because of a urinary tract infection, and then developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet. If that's the case, you'll need to address all three of these factors to resolve the problem.

Cats don't stop using their litter boxes because they're upset at their human caregivers and determined to get revenge for something that offended or angered them. Because humans act for these reasons, it's easy for us to assume that our pets do as well. But animals don't act out of spite or revenge, so it won't help to punish your cat or give her special privileges in the hope that she'll start using the litter box again.

## Medical Problems

It's common for cats with medical problems to begin eliminating outside of their litter boxes. For example, a urinary tract infection or crystals in the urine can make urination very painful—and both are serious conditions that require medical attention. Cats often associate this pain with the litter box and begin to avoid it. So if your cat has a house-soiling problem, check with your veterinarian first to rule

out any medical problems as a cause of the behavior. Cats don't always act sick even when they are, and only a trip to the veterinarian for a thorough physical examination can rule out a medical problem.

## Cleaning Soiled Areas

Because animals are highly motivated to continue soiling an area that smells like urine or feces—and because cats' sense of smell is so much stronger than humans'—it's important to thoroughly and properly clean the soiled areas.

## Aversion to the Litter Box

Your cat may have decided that the litter box is an unpleasant place to eliminate if:

- The box is not clean enough for her.
- She has experienced painful urination or defecation in the box due to a medical problem.
- She has been startled by a noise while using the box.
- She has been ambushed while in the box either by another cat, a child, a dog, or by you, if you were attempting to catch her for some reason.
- She associates the box with punishment (for example, someone punished her for eliminating outside the box, then placed her in the box).

## What You Can Do

Keep the litter box extremely clean. Scoop at least once a day and change the litter completely every four to five days. If you use scoopable litter, you may not need to change the litter as frequently, depending on the number of cats in the household, the size of the cats, and the number of litter boxes.

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