



## Litter Box Avoidance

Very few things are as frustrating and disheartening to a pet owner as a cat who urinates or defecates outside of their litter box. Litter box issues can be complex to understand, and therefore resolve. Here is a list of the most common causes of litter box issues, and some tips to help fix it. There are 4 primary causes of inappropriate elimination in cats:

### **Medical**

The first step is to take your cat to your veterinarian to rule out any physical urinary or bowel issues that could be causing your cat to avoid the litter box. A cat who is experiencing pain while trying to eliminate may associate the litter box with the pain. Urinary tract infections, crystals, kidney stones, irritable bowels, and constipation are a few of the medical issues that can cause litter box issues in cats. A declawed cat may also avoid the litter box due to painful toes.

### **Litter Box Set Up**

Your cat may avoid the litter box if there are aspects of the set up that they don't like. Aspects of litter box set up that may cause litter issues include: if it's not clean enough, too small, too close to their food and water, if it's covered, the sides are too high, the litter type is not ideal (eg. heavily scented), or there are too few boxes.

Make sure that:

- Your litter box is at least 1.5 times the length of the cat (from base of tail to nose)
- Boxes are placed in quiet but accessible places
- There is at least one box per cat (preferably 2) dispersed throughout the home, with at least one on each level
- The box is scooped at least once daily, but ideally twice, and thoroughly washed every 10-14 days
- The scoopable litter is unscented and fine-grained (similar to sand)

### **Environmental Stressors**

Potential causes of stress for your cat can include: a new baby, new animals or people, outdoor cats hanging around your property, new routines, new objects in the home, being let outdoors, or loss of a family member (human or animal).

Ways to reduce stress for your cat:

- Keep your cat indoors.
- Provide your cat with safe hiding spaces and high resting places.
- Play with your kitty and provide enrichment.
- If the source of the stress can be identified and eliminated, then remove it. For example, use blinds to deter your cat from seeing an outdoor cat hanging around, or put your cat in a quiet room when you have guests over if new people make your cat nervous.

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## **Georgian Triangle Humane Society**

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- If the source of stress can be identified but not removed (eg. a new baby), then help your cat to learn to feel comfortable by playing and offering treats near the source of stress to change their association with the stressor from negative to positive. You can also try pheromone diffusers.

### **Tension Among Cats in the Home**

Cats can become competitive with one another for resources or if they don't feel they have enough individual space. They are hierarchical, which can cause bullying. A bully cat may physically block the other cat's access to the litter, or pounce on the other cat while he/she is using the litter. Also, cats who are jockeying for position may mark territory by spraying throughout the home.

Make sure that:

- All cats in the home are spayed/neutered.
- There is a litter box for each cat in the home, plus one extra.
- The litter boxes are large, open, and placed in various areas of the home.
- You have multiple high resting places, so the cats feel they have individual space.
- You have plenty of resources (food/water dishes, toys, beds) so that your cats don't feel the need to fight for resources, and that you give each cat individual attention and play time.
- You work on establishing good relationships amongst the cats (reward them with high value food and treats when they are coexisting peacefully near each other).

### **Regardless of what is causing the issue, here are a few things to avoid:**

- "Punishing" your cat by rubbing his/her nose in urine or feces. This does nothing at best, and at worst hurts your relationship with your kitty.
- Dragging or carrying your cat to the litter box. Your cat likely knows where the box is unless it is brand new.
- Cleaning accidents with ammonia-based products. Urine contains ammonia, so an ammonia-based product can attract your cat to the same spot to urinate again. Use a product specifically designed to clean pet accidents, enzyme based cleaners appear to work well.