

Cat: Litter Box Problems



If your cat is urinating or defecating outside the litter box, we certainly understand your frustration. Luckily, this is a treatable condition in most cases. A medical exam, as well as a few simple changes can help to re-establish proper litter box use.

The first step includes taking your cat to your veterinarian. Whenever a cat suddenly eliminates outside of the litter box, it's strongly advised to get a physical exam including urine analysis and in some cases blood work in order to rule out any illness or injury that may be causing the behavior. Once a medical reason for the lapse in box use has been ruled out, you want to consider behavioral reasons.

There are two main behavioral reasons for failure to eliminate in an established litter box. One is **marking**, which is a form of communication. The second one is **inappropriate elimination**, which is a toileting behavior. Both behaviors may occur for a variety of reasons and we first need to figure out which category your cat belongs to. In some cases this is not as easy as it seems and you will need a professional to help you.

Answer the following 4 questions:

Is your cat depositing urine on vertical or horizontal surfaces?

Are you finding large or small amounts of urine?

Is your cat still using the litter box or has litter box use decreased?

Does your cat stand or squat when she is urinating outside the litter box?

Recommendations if You Think Your Cat Is Marking

If your cat backs into the wall with her tail up and squirts small amounts of urine onto vertical surfaces such as the wall, front door, or windows, your cat most likely is displaying marking behavior, most often triggered by territoriality or stress. While the triggers may seem benign to us, they can likely be a source of turmoil for your cat. Popular triggers include: a new home, new furniture, or the smell or view of a strange cat strolling through the yard or passing by your front door.

This is a normal feline behavior; some cats use urine as a form of communication. In order to get the marking behavior under control, you need to do a number of things all at once.

1. Because the odor of urine draws cats back to previously marked areas, you will have to clean all soiled areas with an enzymatic cleanser. You should take a black light to help you locate all the spots in your house; urine will glow yellow-green in the dark. As the amounts are often small you might be missing areas where your cat sprays. Additionally, it is key to implement excellent litter box hygiene, which has been proven to significantly decrease the incidence of spraying.

- Make previously marked areas unavailable (close doors to certain rooms).
- Place one litter box per cat in the household, plus one extra. Litter boxes should be in different rooms to count as separate boxes because two boxes right next to each other count as one.
- If you have a multi-story house, have litter boxes on each level.
- Keep litter boxes away from food and water bowls, as well as the washer and dryer.
- Always keep the litter box clean. Scoop the box at least once daily and completely empty and clean it with mild dishwashing liquid weekly.

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2. Then try to identify any new stressors in your cat's life. Once you have been able to do so, work to change or remove them. This can be done simply by blocking your cat's view of strange cats with covers on the front window. However, keep in mind that the outside cats might be marking the outside of your door. In this case, you need to deter stray cats from coming near your front door or window, and you will have to clean those areas as well. Deterring cats from coming to your yard or front door can be done with motion activated deterrents. It can also help to initially confine your cat to a separate part of the house where she is more comfortable.

3. Enrich your cat's environment by providing more resting and hiding places, multiple feeding locations, scratching boxes and posts, and interactive toys. Meal times can be made more interesting by hiding small quantities of food around the house or using food dispensing toys to keep an indoor cat busy and less worried about things going on outside the home.

4. A feline facial pheromone, Feliway®, is another option that may help decrease the urine marking.

Recommendations if You Think Your Cat Displays Inappropriate Elimination

Unlike your mother or your roommate, your cat is not worried about your tidiness or lack thereof, even though it may seem that way from the human perspective. However, it is important to keep your cat's litter box tidy and appealing. Cats are picky and if the litter box is not just as your cat likes it, or where your cat likes it to be, then any clothes you may have strewn either on the ground or inside of a laundry basket may become the perfect litter box alternative.

Once medical reasons have been ruled out, review the following guidelines to help identify the issue:

- Are there enough boxes? The magic number is one box per cat in the household, plus one extra—these boxes should be in different rooms to count as separate boxes. Two litter boxes are important in one-cat households because many cats prefer to urinate in one location and defecate in another.
- Offer different types of litter to find your cat's preferred litter: Clumping, non-clumping, sand, clay, etc. If your cat is using soft surfaces such as laundry, chances are your litter is too coarse or too shallow. Use a fine granulated type of litter so the surface is soft and deep, similar to laundry.
- Type of box: Many cats dislike covered boxes, especially in multi-cat households, as the cover on the box limits the cat's ability to protect herself from being ambushed by other cats. Also, many commercially available litter boxes are simply too small for an average-sized cat, let alone a large cat. The box should be at least 1 ½ times the length and width of your cat. If your cat is too large for "jumbo" boxes available at pet stores (and many, if not most, are), many people are successful using a large plastic storage bin with a "door" cut into it, or under-the-bed storage bins, which have lower sides and may not need to be cut.
- Use of litter box liners, harsh detergents, and scented litters: Cats tend to avoid plastic liners, which catch their claws when they scratch and make unpleasant (to a cat) crinkling sounds. The use of harsh or strong smelling cleaners to clean the box may repel your cat, whose nose is much more sensitive than yours.
- Depth of litter: Most cats prefer to have several inches of litter to dig around in, but some prefer shallower litter. Experiment to find your cat's preference.

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- Trauma associated with the litter box: Has your cat ever experienced painful urination or defecation, or other traumatic event associated with the litter box? Do you have dogs or children in your home that might harass the cat when she is trying to use the box?
- Always keep the litter box clean—the box might be dirty and the laundry basket may be the only “clean alternative,” so be sure to scoop daily.
- Use mild dishwashing liquid to wash the box weekly.
- Location: Place the litter box in the same room your cat is eliminating outside the box.
- Keep litter boxes away from food and water bowls, as well as the washer and dryer.
- If you have a multi-story house, have litter boxes on each level.
- The lingering scent of previous accidents: Once your cat has had an accident, it's important to clean the soiled area thoroughly with an enzymatic cleaner meant for urine, such as Nature's Miracle or Anti-Icky Poo (available at the SF SPCA, at most pet stores, or online). Strong citrus scents tend to repel cats, so scented detergent may be helpful as a deterrent.
- You might also try Cat Attract, a litter additive available in many pet stores and also available here at the SF SPCA pharmacy. Every cat is different, of course, but we have seen great success with using Cat Attract.

Tips

- Always begin by consulting your veterinarian to rule out medical causes.
- Check all the above guidelines as every cat and situation is different.
- **VERY IMPORTANT:** Do not punish your cat for marking as this will not solve the problem; this can make your cat even more anxious.