



Paw Prints

Jodi Schneider McNamee
Columnist

When your cat starts thinking outside the box

Unlike many pets, cats arrive in your home with few requirements. Cats crave a high-quality food, seek a safe, stimulating environment, and will cuddle up when given lots of love. And, of course, they need veterinary care and a few sunlit window perches.

But there is one very important thing that every indoor cat or kitten needs: a litter box and suitable litter.

Inappropriate elimination is the most common reason cats are given up to shelters and one of the most common problems that people seek veterinary advice. However, by understanding your cat's behavior and a little patience, most pet parents and their furry feline friends can overcome any issues they have with litter boxes. The good news is only about 10 percent of all cats develop elimination problems.

There are many reasons

why some cats bypass the litter box and go elsewhere. The cause may be a medical condition or stress-induced changes in the household or the litter box itself. It's up to you as your furry friend's pet parent to become a pet detective and track down clues.

Most cats are happy to use a litter box because their instinct is to bury their urine and feces, so if your cat stops using the litter box, there may be a medical problem. As with a change in grooming habits, a departure from litter box etiquette is a reason to contact your vet as soon as possible. Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cat's litter box habits. Once your vet examines your furry friend and gives her a clean bill of health, you can investigate why your cat is eliminating inappropriately.

It's not to make you mad or to get revenge. Actually the number one reason a healthy cat will stop using her litter box is because her litter box is dirty.

Cats are very clean animals. Look at how fastidious they are about grooming themselves. Your cat also has a keen sense of smell, so you can imagine how offensive it is for Kitty to have to eliminate in an unclean litter box.

Keeping your cat's litter box up to standards is very important. And that means scooping out your furry friends litter box daily. How often you replace the litter depends on the number of cats you have, the number of litter boxes you have, and the type of litter you use. It's not as complicated as it sounds.

Too often people forget that their furry friends' litter box usage needs to be addressed from the cat's point of view, not the pet parent's. There are endless possibilities of how to correct the behavioral problem of inappropriate elimination when you keep that in mind. For instance, Kitty's litter box may be too small or too large or the litter may be too scented for her liking. Or her litter box may be placed in an out-of-the-way spot to minimize odor that bothers you.

Think like a Realtor for a moment, because with cats it's all about location, location, location when it comes to litter boxes.

Cats like their litter boxes in quiet areas that provide them with privacy. In your home, that could mean in the master bathroom or in the den. Resist stashing litter boxes in high-traffic areas like the laundry room, or in a place that is hard to get to; she may not use it.

Keep the box far away from her food and water bowls.

If you have more than one cat, veterinarians and animal behaviorists recommend one litter box per cat plus one extra. Giving your cats choices increases the likelihood that they will routinely use a box instead of choosing a corner of the living room. If one cat stakes out one box, the other cat still has a place to go. And if you have a two-story home, place a litter box on each level because the more accessible they are, the more they will be used.

The size of a litter box



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Chai knows where to do her business.

matters, too. The majority of cats prefer large boxes that they can enter easily. And most cats like a shallow bed of litter, so providing one or two inches is better than three or four.

And sometimes it's the litter that's the problem. Give Kitty a choice of litter types. Cats generally prefer non-scented clumping litter with a medium to fine texture like sand. Scented litter may make you feel good, but the smell may be overpowering to your cat.

Remember that cats have a sensitive sense of smell and touch to help them navigate through their environment. These sensitivities can also influence your cat's reaction to her litter. So cats that have grown accustomed to a certain litter might decide that they dislike the smell or feel of a different litter because you decided to try a new brand.

During your detective work remember to clean the soiled areas well. Cats are highly motivated to continue soiling an area that smells like urine or feces.

Your cat may eliminate outside the box due to stress. Cats can be stressed by events that their pet parents may not think of as traumatic. Cats don't like change, so it could be moving the placement of your cat's litter box or adding new pets to the household. Or it could be something as simple as changing your daily routine.

Remember to be patient and try to understand your cat's behavior problem from her point of view. Watch Kitty closely, and through the process of elimination (no pun intended) you should eventually find out why your furry family member has decided to think outside the box.

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