



One of the most important things you can do for your cat is provide a litter box she feels comfortable with and likes to use. You can prevent most litter box problems by understanding your cat's basic nature and needs. It is far easier and more comfortable to prevent inappropriate urination in cats than to deal with it once it occurs.

Many of us tend to assume that cats use a litter box instinctively. Actually, their instinct is to eliminate in soft soil or sand. The box is a convenience for us humans, and it's really rather amazing that cats are so accommodating about it. A cat's habit of using a litter box is a weak one at best. Realizing this will be a great help to both you and your cat.

Elimination is a basic necessity, but in catdom this function takes on additional meaning. Cats use elimination to establish their territories, and their urge to hide their excrement by covering it stems from a need to avoid predators and control parasites.

Here is a quick summary of important things to know:

- Number of Boxes:** 1 for each cat in the house plus an extra box
- Location:** safe, quiet location
- Size:** big enough so Kitty is comfortable
- Litter:** whatever type Kitty likes best
- Cleanliness:** Keep It Clean!!! No one likes a dirty outhouse

NUMBER & LOCATION OF BOXES:

Number of Boxes: The general rule of thumb for the number of litter boxes is one box per cat, plus an extra box. Translated, this means one cat should have two boxes; two cats should have three boxes, and so forth. If it is possible to have two boxes per cat even better.

Location of Boxes: It is important to provide your cat with a place to eliminate in a location where she feels safe and comfortable. Choose a peaceful area where she won't be startled and that provides privacy. Ergo, the laundry room where the spin cycle or dryer buzzer can erupt and startle her out of her wits does not classify as safe. And if Kitty feels unsafe in the area you've provided, she will find somewhere more suitable—which might be in the back of your closet on some soft laundry. Her pleasant experience in your closet may prove far more agreeable than her "scary litter box" and she may make it a habit. She may also find that she likes the feel of laundry or carpet better than the litter and choose this material on a regular basis.

Things to consider when choosing a location for the litter boxes:

Think Stress-Free Litter Box.

1.) If Kitty is part of a multiple cat household, she should have easy access to a private, quiet area that is not a dead end. The back corner of a laundry room with one entry/exit, for example, is a dead end. There should be an escape route available if she feels insecure.

Problem Scenario: Marie and Pierre are two cats living in same house. Marie is using her litter box when Pierre decides "Playtime!" Pierre plans a strategic ambush of Marie while she is concentrating on her business, unaware of his intentions. Pierre pounces on Marie and scares the "!!!"out of her. She tries to run out of the small laundry room, but Pierre blocks the entrance and Marie is trapped. With no time to cover her mess or gather her wits, she records this situation as a very unpleasant experience and will not let herself be trapped there again.

Solution: Provide a safe exit out of the litter box area. Place the box in a spot with a separate entrance and exit. If this is not possible, place an upside-down box next to the litter box to serve as a stepping stool to a counter or some other way out. A kitty condo works great in this situation as well.

2.) Keep Fido away from the box.

Problem: If your dogs are like mine, a little afternoon snack of "Kitty Roca" is a real treat. While many dogs find cat feces appetizing, most cats (and humans) find the act disturbing. Kitty will not feel comfortable using her box while Fido is lurking around.

Solution: Place a child safety gate at the entrance to the door. Leave it a few inches off the ground at the bottom, just enough for Kitty to get under but not Fido. This is a great solution for keeping small children out of the litter box as well.

3.) Don't put the litter box near Kitty's food and water. Do you eat in the bathroom? Kitty doesn't like it either. Considering your cleanliness questionable, she may choose to eliminate elsewhere. Cats do not like to eliminate where they eat and drink. Also, the box shouldn't be near Kitty's bed.

4.) Don't place the box near a door unless the door is generally left open. If Kitty is using the box in what she thinks is a nice quiet area and the door suddenly slams open and someone walks in right next to her, she is likely to feel startled and uncomfortable. Preferring privacy in bathrooms is a trait many cats and humans have in common.

5.) Place two boxes side by side. Many cats like to urinate in one box and defecate in another. Providing two boxes close to each other but not touching gives Kitty options. If not provided with an option, Kitty may choose her own locations.

6.) A litter box on every floor of the house. If you live in a multi-story house, be sure there is a litter box on every floor your cat can access. This is especially important with arthritic or geriatric cats.

7.) Don't place the litter box on carpet. Often the feel of the carpet is more attractive than the litter.

8.) Don't move the box around. Find the best spot for the litter box and if Kitty accepts your decision, don't move it! If you absolutely must change the litter box location, do it gradually. Put a new box in the desired area and then move the old box a few inches a day until Kitty starts using the new box.

SIZE & TYPE OF LITTER BOX:

The Bigger the Better: Most cat boxes are too small. They are designed for the convenience of humans, not felines. The litter box should be at least 24 inches wide or long.

Here are several ways to make a great litter box. Those large under-bed storage boxes for sweaters and such make wonderful litter boxes. They're large enough for Kitty to have ample space and the sides are low enough for easy access. You can put the lids underneath them to help catch extra litter.

If you have a cat that tends to go over the side of the box, you can use the large plastic storage boxes and cut out an entryway. Some cats like the extra privacy provided by an opaque box that can't be seen through. Others prefer a clear box so they can view their environment while in the box. If unsure, try both. Your cat will show you if she has a preference. Covered Litter Boxes:

These, too, are designed for the convenience of humans, not cats. Though they do help keep odor from permeating a room, they concentrate odor in the box. Kitty's sense of smell is so much keener than yours that the intensified odors in her box may discourage her from using it.

Some cats do prefer covered boxes because of the privacy. If you use a covered box, you should scoop it out twice daily. You should also provide an open box in close proximity.

I have used covered boxes without the lids in areas where I could not fit a large sweater box. (You might want to cut an entryway in the front for easy access since the sides are so high.) It serves as an extra box in a different location. The high sides help keep litter from flying around when a cat gets enthusiastic about using the box.

Automatic Litter Boxes:

Those self-cleaning boxes are a great invention for humans. For cats? Well, it depends. Some cats will appreciate how clean their box is kept, but others may be downright scared of this mysterious apparatus and not go anywhere near it.

Automatic boxes have a sensor that indicates when Kitty has left the box and enough time has elapsed for the cleaning to begin. But here is the problem: If Kitty is still in the room when the cleaning begins, the noise and commotion in the box may startle her into thinking, "Yikes! Lucky I wasn't still in there," convincing her to never to take that chance again.

Here is an example with two of my own cats. Mickey and Suki are siblings rescued from a late term spay and raised as orphan kittens. They are extremely loving, well adjusted cats. I thought I would try one of the new automatic boxes as an alternative box. Mickey quickly took to it. After his business was complete, Suki ventured in to use it as well. Just before she was going to step in the box the cleaning began. Terrified by the noise and movement, she ran out and used my bathroom sink instead.

Since the noise is loud enough to hear in other rooms of the house, I removed the box so it wouldn't stress Suki any further. She quickly returned to her normal litter box habits with her old box and all was well.

On the other hand, self-cleaning litter boxes are great for finicky cats that won't use the box if it is at all soiled, and many cats are not at all disturbed by the noise. The key is to provide a regular box in addition to the automatic box in a different location. If you notice inappropriate elimination or agitation at the noise, I recommend not using the automatic box.

TYPE OF LITTER:

A number of different litters are available but most cats prefer the scoop able clumping litters. They are soft and sand-like and are considered a perfect elimination substrate for most cats. The litter should be about three to four inches deep.

The new crystal litters are another option. They absorb urine and its odor completely but still needs to be scooped daily. Most cats will only urinate in them, so another box with a different type of litter should be provided for defecation.

Do not use scented litters or deodorizing products in the litter. They can irritate a cat's paws and the odor is generally offensive to cats, whose sense of smell is much keener than ours. Even baking soda can be objectionable to cats. Urine causes it to fizz.

Find a litter your cat likes and stick with it. If you have to change litters, fill the box with the new litter and sprinkle some of the old litter on top. It will get mixed in with the new litter and your cat will adjust to it better.

Litter Box Liners:

Litter box liners sound like a great idea, but I find them a nuisance and don't recommend using them. They tend to pull away from the sides of the box, which renders them useless, and when the cat scratches, they get caught in the claws. Cats don't like them, and scratching also tears holes in the liner, allowing urine to seep through the holes and increase odor.

CLEANING THE LITTER BOX:

Scoop the box twice a day. It takes only a few minutes and will keep you and your cat happy. It also allows you to monitor elimination, which helps monitor your cat's health. After scooping, apply a fresh layer of litter to the box.

If you are using clumping litter, scoop twice daily and wash the box every one to two weeks. Avoid harsh chemicals for cleaning. A mild unscented soap like Ivory works great. Never use citrus scented cleaning agents, ammonia, or pine cleaning agents. These odors are offensive to cats.

Note: If you have to sterilize the box—for example if your cat was sick with an infectious agent passed in feces—use a dilute solution of bleach: one part bleach to nine parts water. Rinse thoroughly and then wash with mild soap.

Do not flush litter down the toilet. You will eventually require the services of a plumber if you do.

If you are using clay litter, apply a relatively shallow layer and dump it out completely each day. A less desirable option is to scoop twice daily. You can use a slotted scoop to remove feces and a designated un-slotted spoon to scoop out urine-saturated litter. Do not spread the wet litter around the box. This just spreads the smell and makes the box seem unclean to Kitty. Apply a small amount of litter after scooping. You may be able to manage for two to three days with this method, but if you notice any aversion whatsoever (urinating elsewhere, perching on the end of the box, running out of the box immediately after eliminating without covering), then resume with the daily dumping.

If using clay litter, the box needs to be completely cleaned weekly. This means dumping all litter, scrubbing the box with mild soap and water, and refilling with new clean litter. Some longhaired cats prefer clay litter because the fine sand grains of clumping litter sometimes adhere to their bloomers.

Warning: Pregnant women should not clean the litter box due to the danger of Toxoplasmosis. *Toxoplasma gondii* is a parasite that cats can spread through egg spores in their feces. *Toxoplasma* can cause birth defects in humans.

Daily scooping and disposing of litter helps to decrease this risk since the spores require incubation for several days before they reach an infective state. If a pregnant woman must clean the litter box, it is imperative to wear disposable gloves and wash hands thoroughly afterwards.

Litter Tracking:

To help control litter tracking around the house you may want to place a mat at the exit of the box. A short-napped rug such as a doormat or sisal rug is useful for catching litter. Don't use a plush fabric such as a bathroom rug. Kitty may prefer this substrate and begin to use it instead.

All material is provided for informational or educational purposes only, for persons who live with or take care of cats. It is not a replacement for qualified veterinary care. Please discuss your cat's symptoms and medical conditions with your veterinarian.

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