



**Town Lake
Animal Center**
512-972-4PET

Litter Box Problems

There are a number of reasons cats eliminate outside of their litter box. In order to solve this problem you may need to do a little detective work. Try some of the ideas listed below. If you need help, call your local veterinarian or animal behaviorist.

Medical Problems

Cats will eliminate outside of their litter box if they have a medical problem. For example, a urinary tract infection or constipation can make elimination very uncomfortable. Cats can associate the feeling of discomfort with the litter box and stop using it – “it didn’t feel good when I eliminated there, so I will go somewhere else”. As soon as your cat stops using the litter box, have it checked by your veterinarian to rule out medical problems.

Age related problems

Sometimes young cats and old cats need special consideration regarding their litter box. They may need a box on every floor because stairs are difficult for them. They may need low-sided boxes because it is difficult to step into the litter box.

Stress

Stress is another major cause of litter box problems. A cat may feel stressed if they experience a move, a new baby or pet in the home, or if you go on vacation. Reducing the stress can help fix the problem. For example, if there is a new baby in the house you can give the cat a quiet room where it will not be disturbed, special attention and play time alone with you, and special treats when they are around the baby. Identify the source of the stress and try to minimize it.

Aversion to the box

The cat may find the box aversive because it is too dirty, too small, the litter is new, or they have had a painful or frightening experience there. Again the solution depends on the problem. If the box is too dirty, clean it more often. If you switched brands of litter, switch back. If the cat had a bad experience in the box make sure it won’t happen again and add a new box in a new location. The new box may need to be in a quieter area or maybe a more accessible area. Make sure there is not a medical problem. Make sure the dog can’t bother the cat in the box.

Spraying

If you are finding urine on vertical objects (the wall, the leg of the table) then your cat may be spraying. If it is a male, have him neutered. If it is in reaction to other cats in the yard, block the windows. If it is a reaction to stress, then try to remove the source of the stress (see above). Some cats will also urinate on objects with our smell on them (laundry, pillows). This may be a form of marking and is usually a result of stress.

Using Isolation

If the cat is eliminating in several different areas, it may be helpful to confine the cat to a small room like the bathroom for a few days. Add a second litter box if you suspect the cat finds the current box aversive. Make sure the second litter box is different than the current box – different shape, size, litter. Once the cat is using the litter box in the room it can be let out of the room under direct supervision. As long as it continues to use the box it can be allowed out of the room for longer and longer periods of time. This method should be considered carefully because some cats become stressed when confined that it makes the situation worse.

Treating the stains

Clean the stains with an enzyme based cleaner. Don't use any product with ammonia in it. You can buy a fluorescent light to help you locate the urine stains. Once the area is clean, you can cover it with plastic, sticky tape or cat food to make it less attractive to the cat. Or you can try moving an extra litter box to the spot. If the cats starts using that box reliably you can move the box to a new location slowly over time.

Caught in the act

If you catch the cat in the act, make a noise to distract it and close them in the room with the litter box. Don't put them in the box, they will just jump out. Don't punish them, they will just learn to go when you are not around. If you don't catch them in the act, there is nothing to do but clean it up.

Reinforcement

If you catch the cat using the box you can calmly praise it. As soon as it is done you can give it a treat. The cat should only experience fun things in the area around the litter box.

Getting Help

If you need help with your cats litter box problem, please call your local veterinarian or animal behaviorist.