

Troubleshooting Litterbox Issues



Was your cat previously using the litterbox just fine, but is now having accidents? If so, we recommend first asking yourself the following questions to find out what could have caused this sudden change in behavior and how you can address it.

01 Have you taken your cat to the vet?

Before beginning the troubleshooting process, take your cat to the vet to rule out a medical cause for their house soiling. Issues like urinary tract infections (UTIs) and pain can make it harder for your cat to access the litter box, and also make the urge to urinate more frequent.

02 Is your cat neutered?

Unneutered male cats are prone to “spraying” to mark their territory. To prevent this issue, make sure to get your cats spayed and neutered!

03 What type of litterbox are you using?

Cats generally prefer uncovered litterboxes that are large enough for them to comfortably turn around it. We recommend using an uncovered litterbox that is at least 1.5x the length of your cat from their nose to the base of their tail. If you are worried about a mess, you can use a high sided (but still open) litterbox.

04 Is your cat able to access the litterbox?

If you have multiple cats, make sure there are multiple litterboxes spread out throughout the home to ensure one cat is not “guarding” the box. If you have a multi-level home, each floor should have at least one litter box. In addition, make sure the route to the litterbox is easy to navigate.

05 How many litterboxes do you have?

We recommend having at least 1 litterbox per cat, plus an additional box. For example, if you have 3 cats, you would want to have 4 boxes. You also want to ensure that each level of your home has at least one box so that they are easily accessible.

06 Does your cat have any physical limitations?

Seniors cats and kittens may have trouble jumping into a litterbox, so we recommend purchasing one with a lower entry. In addition, cats who cannot easily use stairs or move around may need additional litterboxes where they usually reside.

07 What kind of litter are you using?

Cats generally like fine, sandy litter that is unscented. Pellet or crystal litter may feel unnatural to a cat, while scented litter is overpowering to a cat's senses and can deter them from using the litterbox. If you are concerned about the smell from a litterbox, try cleaning it more often or using an air purifier.

If you would like to use a new litter type, we recommend first adding a second box with the new litter to see if your cat will use it. If they use it, you can make the switch. If not, you'll need to keep using the old litter, since that is what's most comfortable for your kitty.

Some scoopable litters that we recommend are World's Best and Cat Attract. Cat Attract can be used either on its own, or sprinkled on top of the litter you currently use. It contains a natural herb attractant that encourages cats to use the litter box.

Common Triggers of Inappropriate Elimination

- Trash bags and other plastic items
- Dirty clothes
- Bath mats and area rugs
- Cardboard (cardboard scratchers, cardboard boxes, etc)
- Items that smell like another animal - cats might perceive the smell of other animals as a threat to their territory, and may urinate on the item to mark it as theirs.
- Other animals outside - for example, if you have outdoor cats that come around your home, your cat may feel as if their territory is being threatened. If you feed outdoor cats, move their feeding station(s) and shelter(s) farther away from your home. You can also close windows or blinds that may allow your cat to see the outdoor cat.
- If your cat has peed outside the box before, they might continue to pee in that location. Make sure to thoroughly clean the area so it no longer smells like pee. We recommend using products such as My Pet Peed, Nature's Miracle, or an enzymatic cleaner like Angry Orange.

08 How often are you cleaning the litterbox?

Cats do not like to use dirty litter. Make sure you are scooping the litterbox at least once a day and thoroughly cleaning it every 2 weeks to a month, depending on how much it is used. When thoroughly cleaning, make sure to use a mild cleanser with no odor. Remember, strong scents that linger can discourage cats from using the litterbox.

Some cats will not use a litterbox after just one use. In this case, try adding a second litterbox or scooping the box twice a day to see if this helps.



09 Has anything changed in your home recently?

There's construction going on.

This is often unavoidable, but it can still cause a lot of stress for your cat. During any construction or home changes, make sure your cat has a safe location to go to that's away from all the activity.

I moved the litterbox location.

Suddenly moving the litterbox, especially if you are moving it a far distance, can easily confuse your cat. If you need to move the litterbox, do so slowly, a few feet at a time. You can also try adding an additional litterbox in the new location and ensuring your cat is using it before removing the old one. Make sure the new litterbox location is still easily accessible.



I've added a new family member (pet, baby, etc).

New additions to the home, no matter what species, can cause stress for your cat. Before bringing a new family member home, come up with a plan to acclimate them to your kitty. If you're bringing a new pet home, start them off in a separate, closed off room and slowly introduce them to your kitty (see our Lasting Impressions handout for more guidance on introducing cats to other animals). If you are bringing a new baby home, close the door to the nursery initially and let your cat get used to the sounds and smells before allowing slowly introducing them to the room and the baby.

Even after your cat is introduced to your new family member, make sure they have a safe space that they can access at all times. Set up a separate room with all of your cat's essential items, including food, water, litterbox, and enrichment (toys, scratchers, etc). If you've added a new pet to the home, ensure they are not guarding resources, such as the litterbox, and preventing your cat from accessing them. Ensure that your home has at least two separate food and water stations, and at least one litterbox per cat located in different areas of the home.

Help! I've gone through all the steps listed above, and still can't figure out why my cat is peeing outside the box.

- Firstly, we recommend trying products that give off artificial pheromones. These are scents that can't be detected by people, but mimic comforting scents for cats. Some of these products include the **Feliway Optimum Diffuser**, which is plugged into a wall and lasts for 30 days, or **Feliway Classic Spray**, which you can spray 2-3 times a day on items that your cat uses or likes to urinate on.
- Boredom can contribute to stress and cause your cat to pee or poop outside of the litter box. Make sure your cat has lots of enrichment to keep them occupied and provide an outlet for their energy. See the next page for some suggestions for cat enrichment.
- If you've exhausted all other options, we recommend discussing with your veterinarian whether behavior medications, like **fluoxetine (Prozac)**, could help your cat. These medications help address the anxiety and stress that can contribute to inappropriate elimination.



Reduce Stress By Increasing Enrichment

Stress can be a big contributor to inappropriate elimination. While working through the questions above is designed to help you identify potential stressors, sometimes it isn't obvious what's causing the stress. In this case, increasing enrichment can be a good way to keep your kitty occupied and help them get out excess energy, which can help relieve stress. There are many different ways to create enrichment in your cat's life, but we've included just a few below.



Cat Trees: Cat trees, tall furniture, or other things cats can climb provide them with vertical space, allowing them to jump and play while also providing a safe space for your cat to get away from other pets if needed. Many cats also enjoy window perches so that they can watch the outside world.



Toys: Jingly balls, fabric mice, and motorized toys can give your cat hours of self-sustained fun. You can also try toys with catnip and silvervine, which can be attractive to some cats. Wand toys and laser pointers are also fan favorites which provide important opportunities for interactive play!



Scratching Posts & Boxes: Scratching is an innate behavior of cats, and scratching posts/boxes give cats a way to exercise their claws somewhere other than on your furniture! Try both vertical and horizontal scratchers to see what your kitty likes best.



Outdoor Enrichment: Some safe outdoor activities that many easy-going and confident cats enjoy include stroller walks, harness walks, or time spent in an enclosed "catio". Remember, this type of enrichment will take some training, as most cats will not naturally enjoy being put in a harness.



Puzzle feeders: These great way to engage your cat's natural hunting instinct while slowing down their eating and helping them maintain a healthy weight! Additionally, lick mats are a great way to make a lickable treat or wet food last longer and can help keep your kitty occupied.