

## **HELP: Litter Box Problems! How do I make Kitty think “inside the box?”**

Litter box problems are the number one behavioral reason people abuse, abandon, or give up their cat. Before you give up on Fluffy, try to determine what is causing the problem. This article is designed to help you do just that and how to convince the cat to start using the box properly!

Remember the golden rule for litter box problems is NEVER punishing the cat! Harsh treatments will only add to the problem because it causes more stress to the animal. Work at discovering the true cause and re-train the animal if necessary!

### **Step 1: What is my cat actually doing?**

The first step in fixing the problem is to understand what the cat is actually doing. So you need to observe what is actually going on so that you can communicate properly about the situation with your veterinarian and other animal experts.

Urinating outside of the box is NOT the same thing as spraying!

**Spraying**, or territorial marking, is a natural form of communication for male AND female cats and it involves a small amount of urine on the walls, furniture, the floor, or the owner’s clothes. This behavior is obvious because the cat walks up to a vertical surface, turns around, puts their tail in the air and the tail begins to twitch. The cat does not squat! Once the cat is done, they just walk away leaving a spray of urine on the vertical surface.

To decrease territorial marking (spraying): (1) Spay or neuter your cat since the increase in hormones as the animal matures could be the culprit! (2) Create a cat “no stress zone” by using your cat’s own pheromones. Cat’s “mark” their territory by rubbing their face over things leaving their pheromone scent behind. Rub a cloth between your cat’s eye and ear and then wipe the cloth over the soiled areas or you can purchase Feliway, a synthetic pheromone, available in many stores as a spray or plug-in product. (3) Put scratching posts in the areas being marked. This gives the cat a way to “mark” its territory without being destructive through urination. (4) Talk to your vet about medications that can be tried to alter spraying behavior.

**Urinating outside the box** means that the cat “pees on the floor” or another flat surface. A cat that walks to an area, scratches and circles, urinates on the floor, and then scratches again dictates this behavior. This is the same behavior one will notice when the cat uses the litter box properly. Generally, urinating outside the box is caused by a medical condition or is the sign of a behavioral problem!

**Defecating outside of the box** means that the cat is not pooping inside of the litter box but is doing it behind the TV, in front of the cat box, or on your bed, for instance. Again, this is caused by a medical condition or is the sign of a behavioral problem!

## **Step 2: Is there anything medically wrong with the cat?**

Many litter box problems are the result of medical conditions and this is your cat's way of telling you they do not feel well. Urinary tract infections, blood in the urine, increased frequency of urination; increased quantity of urine, small hard stools, and loose stools may all be a cause for litter box avoidance. **So if your cat is not using the box, take her to the vet to rule out a medical problem first!**

## **Step 3: Other Causes for Litter Box Avoidance**

Many non-health related issues may cause litter box avoidance. If you can answer **yes** to any of the following questions, you may have found the cause for why your cat is not using the litter box:

**1. Was the cat declawed recently?** The number one reason a cat does not use the litter box comes from declawing since the surgery is painful. When a cat comes home after surgery, their first use of the litter box is now very painful and they associate that pain with the litter box NOT the surgery. Therefore, kitty begins to avoid the litter box all together. Scratching on the carpet to urinate is less painful then scratching around in litter! (Refer to our articles about declawing for information about the surgical procedure.) Try to change the litter to a type with a smaller grain since this is softer to the touch and avoid clay litters for something pine, corn or wheat based (i.e. Swheat Litter).

**2. Is the cat a senior cat (10+ years old)?** Maybe the cat cannot get into her litter box. Try to get a lower edged box or build kitty a ramp!

**3. Have you changed the brand of litter in the box recently, or changed scents?** Go back to the original brand and see if the behavior stops. Some cats do not like clay, clumping or scented litters!

**4. Have you gone from an "open" litter box to a "covered" litter box, or vise versa?** Some cats get claustrophobic and prefer the open variety while other cats need privacy! Remember these closed boxes are for people not cats....

**5. Have you introduced a new cat, kitten, dog, puppy, or baby to the household?** If the addition of another pet has caused the behavior, you should try to introduce them slower (see our article "[Introducing a Dog and a Cat](#)" for some tips) or you may want to consider returning the new addition since Fluffy may want to be the only "apple of your eye." If the addition of a baby could be the cause, try reading our article "[Some tips on introducing Baby to the family Cat and Dog!](#)" for some tips.

**6. Is another cat stopping the "problem" cat from using the litter box?** Add additional litter boxes to the house. Also talk to your vet about the aggressive behavior of the cat stopping the other cat from using the box. Sometimes the aggressor

**7. Have you tried to convince this cat to be “indoors only”, knowing she was an inside-outside cat in her previous home? Was this cat a stray from outside?**

Some cats do not want to be indoors only. Even though the life expectancy of outdoor cats is about 3-5 years compared to indoor-only cats being about 15 years, some cats cannot be kept inside. Try to leash train (using a harness rather than a collar) the cat so she can get outside time safely. Or you could invest in some cat fencing so that the cat can be outside without getting away. In either case, NEVER leave the cat unsupervised! Another idea is to take some of the dirt from the cats outside “favorite spot” and mix it into her litter. The familiar smell may draw her to the litter box.

**8. Have you moved into a new home recently?** Moving for a cat can be traumatizing, especially if another cat has lived in the house before she has (in the case of renting or moving into a previously owned home with the same carpeting). Try using Feliway to reduce the stress and keep the cat in a single room to get used to the new noises associated with this house. Once she is calm in that room (which may take up to a week or more in some cases), let the cat into another room with a way to get back to the first one. Continue this process until the cat is comfortable in the entire house. Remember moving from the country to the city means that the birds and squirrels were exchanged for loud sirens and gasoline smells!

**9. Has someone left the home or has a new person entered the home?** Someone who recently left the house due to college, death, divorce, or roommate issues may have bonded to the cat. Some breeds (i.e. Himalayans) are known to bond to a single person and any change perceived by the cat to alter this relationship could cause litter box problems. This could be the way the cat is mourning the loss. Would the person who left be able to take the cat with them? The other side of the coin is that the cat is not happy with the new addition of a member of the household. Did you re-marry? Did an adult child move back in? Try to have the new person bond to the cat with those “special charms” (food, treats, cat nip, etc) and see if the litter box avoidance stops.

**Step 4: Get Rid of the Evidence**

Cats will re-mark an area out of habit. Therefore you must eliminate any trace of odor from the soiled area. You should avoid ammonia-based cleaners since they can actually add to the problem; cat urine is very ammonia filled. Therefore, you must use a cleaner that will enzymatically destroy the smell of cat urine (i.e. Nature’s Miracle) or lift the smell out of the carpet/upholstery (i.e. Get Serious). If these cleaners do not seem to remove the smell fully, we strongly suggest replacing the carpet AND padding in that area.

**Step 5: Move the food!**

If a cat continues to re-soil an area, try placing the cat’s food there. Cats tend to not urinate or defecate where they eat! Do this for at least 20 days. If they simply find a new place to soil, add that new area to their dinner location list! Consistency is key here.

### **Step 6: Other things to try!**

- a. Replace the current litter with a product like “Cat Attract” to conjure curiosity of the cat back to the box!
  
- b. Freshen the cat box up! Scoop the box more than one time a day try 2-3 times a day. Try changing the entire litter content 2-3 times a week after the box has been completely washed out with mild soap and water. Also, remember to replace the litter box every 4-6 months since with use, the box will get scratched and permeated with a scent your cat may find offensive.
  
- c. Evaluate if the litter box is in a “high traffic zone”. A noisy environment (near a window, in a busy room, near the kitchen) is not suitable for some cats to feel comfortable enough to use the box. Add another box to a quieter location and see if the cat prefers that new box! Make sure the litter box is NOT near where the cat eats!
  
- d. Use deterrents: aluminum foil, double sided tape, plastic carpet runners spike side up, lemon scented air fresheners all work well.
  
- e. Play with your cat more. Play is a great way to relax a cat and spending time with you reinforces the love and devotion that cat may crave. When you are not home, make sure there are many toys (stuffed mice, cat nip mats, turbo scratcher, etc) available to stalk and pounce.
  
- f. Contact a more experienced cat owner for their input! Groups like CARA and your local veterinary office are good sources of information. Also, check out the local library for books dedicated to the subject!

Good luck.