

LITTERBOX BASICS

An Ounce of Prevention

- All cats should be spayed or neutered as young as is safely possible. Sexually mature, intact cats frequently use urine and fecal marking to indicate their territory. Altering will correct 90% of the problems that involve marking behavior.
- Find a litter that is appealing to the cat. NEVER use scented litter. Perfumed, chemical scents repel cats. Use a mild dishwashing liquid or hot water and vinegar for cleaning—not ammonia or other harsh chemicals which will leave an odor.
- Texture is important, too. Generally speaking, the clumping type or gravel type of litter is most acceptable. The sand type is very popular, but as a health precaution for kittens under four months old, it may pose a problem as they may ingest the litter.
- Cleanliness is absolutely essential! The single most common reason for a cat's refusal to use a litterbox is because the box is dirty—no one likes a dirty bathroom. Clumping litter should be scooped daily, and the litterboxes washed weekly. Non-clumping litter should be scooped daily and the box emptied and washed every other day.
- How many litterboxes do you need? Having one box per cat in the household, plus one extra is the best formula for success. Being the individuals they are, some cats prefer to urinate in one box and defecate in another. Some cats will refuse to use a box that another cat has already soiled.
- Litterbox liners—they are often irritating to cats because their claws catch in the plastic. Covered litterboxes, or ones that are too small for the cat, may cause litterbox avoidance.
- The best location for litterboxes is a quiet, private place where they will not be disturbed by people or other pets. Noisy areas near washing machines, furnaces or under stairs may frighten the cat away from the box. Never place the litterbox close to food and water dishes. If you live in a multi-story house, it is best to have a box on each level.
- Kittens have an innate predisposition to use loose material as their litter, but they may also choose other locations. Limit the kitten's territory until they learn that the litterbox is the only acceptable place for elimination. Just as with small children, they should not be expected to have to travel very far to find their toilet areas. Praise and rewards will help to speed the process.
- Confining any new cat to a single room is the best way to introduce her to her new home. Prepare a small room with food, water, litterbox and toys and keep her in that room until she is ready to explore and has already used the litterbox. Her scent in the box will be important to her.
- Help make your cat comfortable and at ease in his home—his territory. Play games with him, pet, talk to him frequently. Give him positive and affectionate attention, and keep to a routine as much as is possible. A confident, secure, relaxed and content cat does not need to relieve anxiety and stress by such extreme measures as urine or fecal marking.
- Some cats do have unusual litterbox preferences. Some like smooth or soft surfaces and will often use the bathtub or the floor next to the litterbox. Declawed cats have a

reputation for doing this more often than others. Try offering the cat an empty litterbox or one lined only with newspaper.

If Your Cat Is Not Using The Litterbox: A Pound Of Cure

- First of all, rule out a medical cause. Have your cat examined by a veterinarian and be sure to mention the urination and/or defecation problems. If it is painful for the cat to urinate or defecate, it may associate the pain with the litterbox, and try elsewhere. If it is a medical problem, it will be necessary to reintroduce the kitty to the box after treatment.
- Next, read the steps for preventing litterbox problems. Are you following all of them? Try to accommodate the cat's preferences for a quiet location and litter material whenever possible. It may be that adding more litterboxes, cleaning more frequently or changing the brand or type of litter is all it takes. When switching litters, do so slowly, by mixing the old one with the new for a while instead of making an abrupt change.
- Never punish the cat for not using the box. There is a reason for your cat not choosing to use the litterbox. This usually occurs when the box, its contents or location is offensive to the cat or when the cat is stressed by something in its environment. **HOUSE SOILING IS NEVER DONE TO SPITE THE OWNER!**
- If an aversion to the litterbox can be ruled out, it is possible that the problem could be anxiety related. Are there changes in the household, construction going on, cats or wild animals visible out the windows? Any intrusion on the cat's territory, whether human, animal or even a new piece of furniture, can cause a cat to feel threatened, insecure and stressed. This will result in the need to remind himself and everyone else that this is his territory. Territorial marking is usually accomplished by spraying urine on vertical or horizontal surfaces. Less frequently, cats will mark by squatting and urinating or defecating on horizontal surfaces. Cats in a multi-cat household are more likely to spray.
- Try to relieve or eliminate the source of the cat's anxiety—for instance try pulling the drapes so that he cannot view the antics of the cat next door. If the environmental cause that triggers the territorial behavior cannot be identified or eliminated, consult with an experienced feline behavior counselor.
- A confinement period will be necessary, whatever the cause of the inappropriate elimination. It is essential to thoroughly clean the soiled areas, place deterrents in these spots and to purchase more litterboxes or different litter. The kitty should be placed in a comfortable room with two litterboxes, fresh food and water, and a bed and toys—remember to keep food and water away from litterboxes. Visit with him regularly, but don't release him until the home environment has been cleaned and the litterbox situation has been improved. Confining him will help re-establish good litter habits. When reintroducing him to the home, it is very important to praise his appropriate behavior.
- In order to thoroughly clean the urine-soaked areas, a black light (available at pet supply stores) may be used to identify the problem spots, and a strong enzymatic cleaner should be used to saturate the spot and neutralize the odor. Thoroughly soaking the area with Nature's Miracle has proven effective. To repel kitty from previously soiled areas, cover them with a vinyl carpet runner (upside down), a solid air freshener (preferably a citrus scent), furniture, or bowls of dry cat food.

This information is courtesy of the San Francisco Cat Behavior Helpline at (415) 554-3075 or catbehavior@sfpca.org.