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ANIMAL RESCUE LEAGUE OF IOWA, INC.

The Litterbox

Top 10 Reasons Your Cat Might Have Stopped Using It's Litterbox

Note: Following is a general list of reasons cats stop using their litterbox. Please note that cats may use their litterbox for years and then stop using it for no apparent reason. Most likely there IS a reason they have stopped, and to fix the problem, you will need to figure out what the reason is. It is possible, however, that your cat has been using the litterbox for years, and all of a sudden decided that what they didn't like about their litterbox was just too much to take one more time. Most litterbox problems can be fixed and your cat will be back to using it's litterbox immediately.

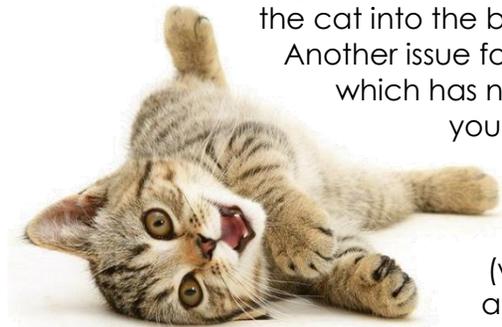
1. **Medical problem**

Cats may stop using their litterbox due to a medical problem – such as urinary tract infection (UTI). Medical reasons may make it uncomfortable for a cat to use its litterbox and because the cat most likely first felt the 'pain' from whatever medical reason while it was using the litterbox, the cat may associate the litterbox with the pain. When having litterbox problems with your cat you should first take your cat to your veterinarian to rule out a medical issue as being the cause for the litterbox problems.

2. **Poor location of litterbox**

Poor location of a litterbox might cause a cat to quit using its litterbox. For example, perhaps you have placed your cat's litterbox next to a noisy hot water heater, or by the washer and dryer. Cats tend to like quiet, private places to go to the bathroom. You should add a litterbox in a quieter place and see if your cat starts to use that new box. (Never place an adult cat that is having litterbox problems into a litterbox – this typically tends to make the cat think that the litterbox is a punishment – i.e. the cat already has issues with the box for some reason and you are sticking the cat into the box! Let your cat see you setting up a new box, but don't put the cat into the box – let your cat discover the new box on his own.)

Another issue for a cat can be that they feel their litterbox is located in an area, which has no "escape route." This can be a common issue for any cat, but you tend to see this problem most in homes where there are multiple cats, dogs, children or just a busy household. Cats with "escape route syndrome" basically want to have their litterbox located in a corner so they can see out and about (with their back to the wall) while they are using the litterbox. This allows them to use their box and see what might be coming up to interrupt them.



3. **Unclean box**

Not only is a cat's sense of smell many times sharper than ours, their noses are 20 times closer to a smell's source. Cats would like to have their boxes cleaned after every time they use it; but realistically it would be great if it could be cleaned once a day, or at a minimum thoroughly cleaned once a week (even if you use scoopable litter).

Do not use bleach or any other strong smelling cleaning agent to clean the box or this will cause your cat to shy away from it. Use hot, soapy water to clean the box thoroughly.

4. **Litter choice**

If your cat was using its litterbox and then you decided to change the litter to something "better" – you may have a problem. It is important to mention the old saying "If it ain't broken, don't fix it." If your cat is using its litterbox, don't switch the litter for any reason.

If you have switched the litter from what the cat is used to, this could be why your cat has stopped using the litterbox. You should switch back to your original cat litter to see if this fixes the problem.

Note that litters with perfumes or additives for smell in litter may also cause your cat to rebel. Some cats have an aversion to these smells. Some cats with "litter aversion syndrome" can even stop using their litterbox because they don't like the feel of a harder type of litter. Clumpable/scoopable litter can be used to give your cat something softer to go to the bathroom on.

To see if this is something that is an issue for your cat, you should add another litterbox with scoopable/clumpable litter in it next to the cat's original box and see which box with which litter your cat chooses to use.

Note: If for some reason you HAVE to switch cat litters you should gradually mix the new litter type you are switching to with the litter that the cat has had over a period of time – gradually increasing the amount of the new litter vs. the old litter, until you are 100% to the new litter.

5. **Box size**

The litterbox you choose for your cat needs to be shallow enough that a cat can climb into it (pay attention to this if you have a kitten!). A litterbox also needs to grow in size with your cat. If you have a large cat, a plastic under the bed storage unit can be used as a litterbox.

6. **Privacy issues**

Cats are "evolutionary programmed" to follow an elimination ritual to cover their scent to protect them from predators – this calls for peace and quiet! Don't place your cat's litterbox in a high traffic area, but also, do not stick your cat's litterbox in some dark hallway, or closet area. Cats also need to be able to easily get into their litterboxes.

Some people get covered litterboxes to give their cats more privacy, but covered litterboxes can be a huge problem for some cats for a couple of reasons. The first is that covered litterboxes will tend to keep the smell more confined right in the area your cat is going to the bathroom. Cats have such a keen sense of smell this is a problem for most cats. Secondly, covered litterboxes are horrible for cats that have "escape route" issues (explained in 2. above) because your cat can't see out and around his box at all. Take the cover off the litterbox and see if this solves your problem.

7. **Litterbox count**

You should have at least one litterbox per cat in the household. In some circumstances, two litterboxes per cat (some cats won't urinate and defecate in the same box). If you have 2 cats and only one litterbox, add a litterbox next to the original box you had. Both cats may end up using both litterboxes, but they will each have a box.



8. **Moving location**

Moving the box from location to location can be a problem for a cat. Find a place the cat and you both like, and stick with it. Cats take their litterbox area very seriously and you should too.

9. **Invaded territory**

If a cat is in the litterbox and a second cat (or dog, or other) in the household confronts it while it is in the box, the cat may start to avoid the box to avoid the confrontation.

In addition, if your cat can see another cat outside through a window or door, this may cause stress (feels its territory is being invaded). Typically you will see spraying (vs. urination) in this regard and if that is the case you will need to deal with the territory and spraying issues to solve the problem.

Again, as discussed above, no "escape route" for some cats can be an issue due to invaded territory.

10. Punishment strategies

Cats do NOT do things out of anger; they are trying to communicate there is a problem! If you punish your cat when it doesn't use its litterbox, you have added to the stress your cat is already feeling and instead of stopping the problem, you may have just accelerated the problem. NEVER punish your cat when he doesn't use the litterbox (or for any other reason) – only use positive methods and positive reinforcement to solve a litterbox problem.



In addition:

Never rub their noses in their accidents! Not only is this not going to solve the problem, it will make it worse. In addition, this is completely unhealthy for your cat.

Never physically place them into the litterbox thinking you are sending the signal to use the box. In actuality this will cause the cat to think it isn't supposed to use the box because your cat will think the box is someplace where he gets punished.

The use of squirt bottles is not recommended because it is difficult to use a squirt bottle and not be seen by the cat.

Confinement also doesn't necessarily solve the problem long term because you haven't addressed why your cat quit using it in the first place. Confinement may work short term because the confinement area may be so small your cat doesn't have a choice not to use the box, but long term we need to solve the problem of why your cat quit using his litterbox so your cat can live out and about your house as a member of the family.

Never take an indoor cat and put them outside to be an outside cat because of a litterbox problem. Indoor cats should be indoor cats and should stay that way. You need to work to solve the litterbox problem for your cat.

Myths

It is important to note that cats do not quit using their litterbox to “get back at their guardians.” A cat may even urinate on the floor right in front of their guardians, or urinate on their guardian's bed but the cat is only going in these places to get the attention of their guardians, because they can't help it, or because the surface they are going on is softer than their litterbox. Cats also do not quit using their litterbox because they are “jealous” of another pet, a new baby, etc.

Spraying

Spraying is a separate issue from regular litterbox issues. Spraying is usually (but not always) due to territory issues. Here are a few things you can do to solve spraying issues:

- Close all the curtains/drapes in your house for a period of time so they can't see outside, and thus, can't see other cats walking around their yard (their territory).
- Use Feliway by and around the windows/doors that your cat is spraying around. Feliway is a spray that contains cat pheromones and so tends to make stressed out cats relax. You can get Feliway at pet supply stores or by ordering it on-line from pet supply websites.
- Talk to your neighbors and ask them to keep their cats in their houses so they aren't wandering into your yard where your cat can see them.

If you need help, please call the ARL's cat behavior counselor at 515/262-9503 or e-mail the ARL at arl@arl-iowa.org , Attn: Carol.