

My cat isn't using his litterbox!

Inappropriate elimination in cats is a very common -- if frustrating-- scenario, and can be caused by many different factors. Understanding the cause is crucial to proper treatment, so the following factors must be considered before taking action of any kind:

1. Medical conditions. Colitis, inflammatory bowel disease, hyperthyroidism, kidney or liver disease, urinary tract infections and diabetes can all contribute to a litter box rejection. Other medical problems can cause pain to the cat and lead him to avoid his box: arthritis, constipation, anal sac disease and colitis may be factors. Have your cat thoroughly checked by a veterinarian to determine if a physical malady is causing the problem.
2. Stress. Many people are unaware of how stressful the smallest changes can be to a cat. While moving, new pets, grief, changes in routine and changes in family dynamics are common causes, cats can also be upset by rearranged/new furniture, new litter box locations (even a few feet away), and different brands of litter, among other causes. Give your cat plenty of attention, play time, care and reassurance in times of stress to help him adjust. A product called "Feliway", available in major pet stores, contains calming pheromones designed to reduce anxiety, which in turn can reduce spraying and inappropriate urination.
3. Litter preference. Most cats prefer a litter with the following three qualities: it should be a base material the cat doesn't mind standing on, loose enough for the cat to dig and cover feces/urine, and it should be unscented. Avoid changing the brand of litter suddenly, as this may cause the cat to avoid the box.
4. Litter box location. Avoid placing the box near the cat's food and water. Also avoid placing it either in an area that's too busy (not allowing them privacy) or so isolated that family members may forget to clean it. Avoid placing it in corners or closets where the cat may be ambushed by another cat. We recommend a litter box per cat, plus one:

therefore, a 2-cat household should provide 3 boxes. If you have more than one floor, provide one for every floor.

5. Litter box cleanliness. Some cats are extremely particular about litter hygiene. Some won't defecate in a box already containing urine. Still others won't use a box that was recently used by another cat. If the box is not clean enough for a cat's taste, he will usually seek out porous materials at floor level, such as a soft carpet, cushion or a pile of laundry. Just as we don't like to use dirty toilets, neither do cats!

Possible solutions to elimination problems

As discussed previously, have your cat checked by a vet to rule out medical conditions. Some people tell us, "My cat was just at the vet, and they said she's fine," but a routine check-up will not typically reveal complex internal problems. Explain the behavior and ask for a urinalysis, stool check and – especially if the cat is a senior – a blood draw.

If your cat is a senior, try a box with lower sides: a large box may be too uncomfortable for him to climb in and out.

Place numerous litter boxes around the house with different substrates: newspaper, clumping litter, non-clumping litter, sand, sawdust, carpet remnants and no litter at all. If you find that your cat prefers an unacceptable surface (such as carpet), try to slowly convert the cat back to a litter by adding a little litter each week. Continue adding more litter until you can remove the carpet remnants from the box.

Try different depths of litter. If you routinely find excess (clean) litter on the floor beside the box, you're probably using too much. Aim for around 2 inches.

Clean soiled areas with an enzyme-based cleaner such as Nature's Miracle. Regular cleaners will not break down the urine/stool traces, so that the cat may continue to use those spots. If the carpet or padding is saturated, it may need to be replaced.

Clean the litter boxes at least twice daily and wash the box once a week (soap and warm water only; do not use a strong-smelling disinfectant).

If the problem is confined to one area (such as a bedroom), close the door to keep the cat out.

Try feeding the cat where he is urinating/defecating, as many cats will not do both in the same place!

Use aluminum foil, upside-down carpet runners (with the plastic spikes on the bottom), double-sided tape, etc. to encourage the cat to avoid areas where she has eliminated before.

Try Feliway and follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Do NOT punish! Physical or verbal punishment will not help, and – since it increases a cat's stress – will likely make the problem worse. Contrary to popular belief, **litter box problems have nothing to do with spite.**

If needed, confine your cat (especially if newly adopted) to a small, cat-proofed room with bedding, food, water, toys and at least one litter box. Keep him there until you can be sure he is using his litter box, then gradually allow him access to other areas of the house.

Managing scratching behavior in cats

Cats scratch for a variety of reasons: to maintain the health of their nails (discarding the dead outer sheath and exposing the new growth underneath), to stretch out the muscles in their shoulders and back, to mark their territory around other cats, and to serve as an emotional outlet (scratching after being startled, frustrated, or relieved at the owner returning home). Cats need to scratch just as puppies need to chew, so the owner's goal is not to eliminate the behavior but to manage it in the safest and least destructive way possible.

Some owners of dedicated scratchers consider declawing them, but there are consequences to be considered first. First, it is serious and permanent surgery, the equivalent of having the last joint of all of your fingers removed. Cats experience pain for days afterward, during which they may need alternate litter in their box that won't further irritate their wounds. Declawed cats are utterly defenseless against attackers, and so can never be let outside. Declawing can also alter a cat's sense of balance, a danger in any animal that likes to climb. All in all, many veterinarians consider declawing a last resort. Teaching a cat to use appropriate surfaces for scratching is much less traumatic for all involved.

Follow these tips to get your cat started:

Provide the right scratching post: Pam Johnson-Bennett, author of *"Think Like a Cat,"* provides three rules for a scratching post. It must be:

1. covered in the right material,
2. sturdy and well-constructed, and
3. tall enough for a full stretch.

What is the right material? Bennett recommends sisal, rope or any rough texture. Carpet is OK only if the material is rough enough. The post must be sturdy enough that the cat cannot tip it, so we recommend cat trees (tall posts with multiple perching levels) that allow the cat to adequately stretch its back muscles.

Location, location: Keep the post plainly visible; do not hide it in the spare bedroom! If the post is for a kitten, put it in the middle of his room where he can't miss it. You want the post to be accessible to the cat when you come home, after he's awoken from a nap and after he's eaten. This won't happen if he can't find it!

Introducing kitty to the post: Whether your cat is young or old, make this process a game. Dangle a cat-teaser near or over the post and wait for him to put his claws on it. If he shows no interest, turn the post on its side and keep playing. If you choose, you can gently run your fingernails over the post but do not put the cat's paws on it: he won't understand what you're

doing and may learn to dislike the post. Once he discovers the texture and begins scratching, praise him for using it. If he's food motivated, you can offer him a small treat.

No punishment. Scratching is a normal behavior so it cannot be reprimanded: focus on redirecting the cat back to his post with the game described above. Some people recommend remote punishing devices, like attaching inflated balloons to the furniture (so that they will pop when scratched and deter future scratching), but we don't recommend this. Many cats find it too frightening, and the noise may punish other cats in the household who are doing nothing wrong. Still other cats have been known to eat balloon fragments and become ill.

Make your furniture unappealing to the cat. Double-sided tape can leave a residue on furniture, so we recommend instead a product called Sticky Paws, a water-soluble adhesive applied like tape. Apply this to areas the cat has already been scratching. If the cat has been using the entire piece of furniture, cover it with a sheet (taping the bottom so he can't climb up underneath it) and apply Sticky Paws or double-sided tape at various spots. Place his post right next to the furniture. When the cat has been routinely using the post instead of the furniture, gradually move it (an inch each day) to where you want it permanently located, remembering that it should still be highly visible. When the cat appears to go right for his post without paying attention to the furniture, take the sheet off.

Trim his claws regularly. Well-trimmed claws don't do as much damage, so have your vet or groomer show you how to trim them. The Animal Humane Society also conducts a monthly "Chip and Nail Clinic", providing microchipping and nail-trimming at low cost for the public.

Other options for damage control. Some cats prefer horizontal scratching surfaces to vertical ones, and major pet supply stores carry such products in their cat section. You might also consider Soft Paws, little plastic caps that can be glued to your cat's nails. The cat will still attempt to scratch, but the caps will prevent damage to your furniture. (This option is best for owners who are unable to train their cats to a post but do not want to declaw them.) The caps typically last one to two months: any that have not fallen off or been chewed off by the cat will have to be removed as the cat's nails grow.