

Litter Choices Go Beyond the Norm

To switch to a new brand of litter, make the transition gradually.

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Q. I have been reading that the silica dust in clay litters can be dangerous and can even cause silicosis and lung cancer, as it collects in the lungs. What is your opinion on this?

I have five cats and one is developing a respiratory problem and I think it is from the clay litter dust. I live in a small 500 square foot apartment and the dust seems to get everywhere. I tried a name brand corn litter, which I began mixing in gradually, but my cats appeared hesitant about using the litterbox, so I discontinued that experiment. I have been told that a name brand litter made of newspapers has low-dust; any comments on this type of litter?

I've also been told that the pine pellet litters have low-dust, but again there is the issue of the transition to the hard pellets. I also read that the abietic acid in pine can damage the respiratory tract causing respiratory disease and asthma.

What are your recommendations? Please help!

A. Although these questions have come up from time to time in the veterinary world, no factual answers have been established.

A few years ago there was a small study done at the Animal Medical Center (AMC) in New York regarding this issue. The conclusions of the study was not clear-cut, but I think it's safe to say that in cats with pre-existing airway disease, silica may act as an airway irritant. There was no evidence that silica (itself) caused disease.

If your cats seem to be sensitive to the litter that you are currently using, I would try to slowly switch to the pellet form of litter. This may take up to 4 to 6 months (for your cats to get used to it), as you gradually decrease the clay portion and increase the pellet portion of the litter. Also, some clumping litters are both dust-free and soft, and might be a good alternative.