

Litterbox Lessons

Has your cat stopped using the litterbox? Learn the 10 most common reasons and how you can prevent them from happening in your home.

When it comes to figuring out why your normally fastidious feline starts doing its business in your Boston fern or on your Berber carpeting, it's essential to think inside and outside the box the litterbox, that is. There are many reasons a cat may develop an aversion to its facilities, but spite is not among them.

"Cats don't stop using their box for no reason," says Char Bebiak, feline behaviorist and animal trainer for Ralston Purina. "It's instinctive behavior for them from the time they're 4 weeks old. It's up to you to find out what's wrong."

What's "wrong" could be physical, and it should be your first consideration if something is amiss at the box. While a medical condition may not be the most common reason for bad litterbox behavior, its potentially dangerous nature puts it at the top of our list.

1. Medical Problem

If your cat starts displaying poor litterbox habits, you should take it immediately to your veterinarian and have it checked for a urinary tract problem, says Pam Johnson-Bennett, a feline behaviorist of 20 years and author of several animal-behavior books. "It may be associating the box with the pain it feels when it eliminates."

Wayne Hunthausen, DVM, director of Animal Behavior Consultations at the Westwood Animal Hospital in Westwood, Kan., stresses that while lower urinary tract problems are more common, diabetes or renal failure can cause excess urination, resulting in a particularly wet box a cat may wish to avoid.

2. Poor Location

After ruling out health issues, ask yourself the following questions: Is the box in a high-traffic area where your cat might be disturbed during its potty break? Is the box easy to access, or does kitty have to hunt for it? "You can't expect a cat to travel two or three stories into a dark basement to find its box," says John Prange, DVM, a veterinary consultant for LitterMaid, a self-cleaning litterbox manufacturer.

Pam Johnson-Bennett follows a few simple rules with regard to box placement. "Make sure the box isn't wedged in a corner where the cat feels trapped. Don't play 'musical litterboxes' [moving it too much]. And finally, don't make it hard to find or unpleasant to use," she says.

The experts add that when selecting a private, accessible, quiet place for your cat's box, keep in mind the room's primary use. "If you use a laundry or utility room, don't put the box near anything that might suddenly make noise and scare the cat, such as water heaters, furnaces or washing machines," Bebiak says. And skip the bathroom; the room's humidity can affect a litter's ability to dry properly.

3. Unclean Box

The reason for box avoidance could be right under your nose and kitty's.

"Not only is a cat's sense of smell hundreds times sharper than ours, their noses are also 20 times closer to a smell's source, so they should be the final judge of what's clean enough," Hunthausen says.

"Cats would like [the litterbox] cleaned every time they use it. "They don't want to go where they've been before. They want the waste gone and buried. We need to re-educate cat owners that a box should be cleaned at least once daily. If a cat smells foulness, he'll just keep digging to find clean litter," Prange says.

Johnson-Bennett has three cats and scoops twice a day. "We don't want to smell litterbox smells and neither does the cat," she says. "They want to smell their own scent or a neutral smell." She keeps one box in her office and cleans it so often "no one ever knows it's there."

4. Litter Choice

If you've recently switched litter brands, your cat may be displaying its displeasure. Changing litters because a new one

was on sale or the store around the corner was out of stock may not seem like a big deal to you, but it could be to your cat.

"Some cats are rather particular," Hunthausen says, noting that something as innocuous as a liner could also cause problems. "Some cats, if they're really strong diggers, can snag their claws on the liner," he says.

Johnson-Bennett agrees cats are not big fans of change and can react negatively if you switch brands on them. She and her cats prefer an unscented clumping litter one that does the job without any perfumes or additives to offend a cat's sensitive nose. Sometimes the problem is underfoot. Prange says cats with extra-sensitive feet can develop litter aversion syndrome from the discomfort of stepping on certain harder compounds.

5. Box Size

The container itself may be the culprit. The truth is, size, at least where litterboxes are concerned, does matter. A small cat or kitten will need a box or pan shallow enough to climb into easily, Bebiak says. Expect your box to grow with your cat. The small pan that's perfect for your kitten won't do the job if he grows up to be a 20-pound adult. "Cats need enough 'prime real estate' in order to be happy with their boxes," Hunthausen says.

A litterbox is never one-size-fits-all, Johnson-Bennett says. Different cats have different tastes and needs. You may have to try a couple of different kinds of boxes before you find one that works best for you and your cat.

6. Privacy Issues

Privacy is an issue for some cats, Bebiak says, which could be a problem if the box is located in a high-traffic area.

Cats are solitary animals, says Myrna Milani, DVM, an animal behaviorist who works out of the Westminster Animal Hospital in Westminster, Vt.

"We don't think about being respectful of animals' feelings," she says. Cats are "evolutionarily programmed" to follow an elimination ritual to cover their scent to protect them from predators. This ritual calls for peace and quiet, she says.

7. Litterbox Count

Multicat households may not have enough boxes available to satisfy each cat's need.

In an ideal world there would be one box for each cat, Prange says. The problem is compounded if some cats are particularly territorial or aggressive about usage.

"There are cats that simply will not defecate and urinate in the same box, Milani says. "So you may have to have two boxes for one cat."

More cats in the household can introduce more litterbox problems. Some cats are able to use one box, whereas others are not. You'll have to experiment with the new addition and immediately address specific litterbox needs.

8. Moving Location

You may think one room is as good as another, but kitty may think differently. If the box is moved into a family room where the kids play video games or the stereo is usually blaring, your cat's going to have a difficult time relaxing enough to do its duty. If you move the box to a room where an appliance makes a sudden noise, the cat could become afraid of the box by association.

We live in a completely different world than cats do, Milani says.

"Most of their hearing is tuned in at an ultrasonic level. If a litterbox had originally been placed by a snug, protected interior wall and then moved against an exterior wall where the cat can hear noises from the outside, such as other cats, this can be upsetting to some cats. It all depends on their level of confidence," Milani says.

9. Invaded Territory

"Cats feel most vulnerable when they sleep, eat and use the litterbox," Johnson-Bennett says. "That's why they like to sleep in elevated places and always keep an eye on what's going on around them."

If a cat is in the litterbox and the household's more aggressive cat confronts it, it will feel stress and may start to avoid the box. The same could happen if the box is located near a window where the cat could see outside "intruder" cats approach the house. "The cat figures the strange cat is where its box is located and might decide to avoid the whole situation," Johnson-Bennett says.

10. Punishment Strategies

"When a cat doesn't use the box, sometimes we punish them by rubbing their noses in it, or we grab the cat and toss it in the box," Johnson-Bennett says. "The cat begins to associate the box with punishment and thinks you're saying 'don't go.'" And again, the cat will then use an unacceptable area to relieve itself.