

## Top 5 Litterbox Problems Solved

**Our experts provide answers to conquer common litterbox frustrations.**

*by Laura Lee Bloor*

Wouldn't it be great if we lived in a world where all cats were toilet-trained? Unfortunately, until that magical day arrives, we and our cats are stuck with litterboxes, and the complications that can accompany them. That's why we asked several pet experts to answer the five most common complaints they encounter.

### 1. How do I get my cat to stop eliminating outside of the litterbox?

One of the most common complaints veterinarians hear from pet owners is that their cats won't use the litterbox. This problem is known as inappropriate elimination and can be a complex quandary. Your first step in solving this problem is to have your vet examine your cats to make sure there are no medical reasons for their behavior. If your cat is healthy, you can start to look at environmental factors causing your cats' accidents.

As with real estate, litterbox location matters to your cats. "The single biggest problem I find, at least with my clients, is that they often have an inappropriate location [for the litterbox]," says John Wright, a certified animal behaviorist and professor of psychology at Mercer University in Macon, Ga.

Litterboxes must be in a quiet, private and safe place, Wright says. Places such as laundry rooms where washers and dryers rumble or basements where furnace heaters thump and hiss are not recommended, he says.

Not only does the litterbox need to be in the right location, but also keep it far from your cats' food and water dishes. Cats don't like to eat and drink in the same vicinity where they go to the bathroom, so keep them in separate rooms, says Jennifer Rockwell, a veterinarian with Montana Veterinary Specialists General Care in Helena, Mont. Would you want to eat by a Porta-Potty?

To ensure cats feel safe, make sure they have plenty of vacating options from the litterbox. Because cats are natural predators, they also are natural prey, so they need escape routes available to them when going to the bathroom. Cats can feel trapped in covered litterboxes, Rockwell says. Similarly, if you have a multi-cat household, keep litterboxes spread throughout the house to prevent any one cat becoming territorial over a litterbox and bullying others away from it, she says.

The number of litterboxes is also important to halting inappropriate elimination issues. Rockwell recommends keeping one litterbox per cat and then one extra, so if you have three cats, you need four litterboxes.

Litterbox size plays another pivotal role. Larger cats require larger boxes.

"Sometimes when I do my housecalls, I'll see [the owners] haven't changed the size of the litterbox from what it was when the cat was a kitten and will find defecation outside of the box," Wright says. "The cat wants to go in, but the litterbox is not big enough to do the job."

Cats are finicky — no newsflash there — so also check to see if the litter is the source of avoidance. To test what litter(s) your cat prefers, set up about four litterboxes each filled with different types of litter that vary greatly in composition, texture and scent. At the end of each day write down which litter(s) your cat used, recommends Janice Willard, a veterinarian and behaviorist. At the end of the week, you should know your cat's preference.

Were there any changes in your home lately? Holidays, new people moving into or out of the home, new pets, babies who have graduated into the toddler stage, and other animals that prowl outside the home are a few environmental stressors that can cause cats to go outside of the box, Willard says.

"[Your cat] isn't doing it because he's mad you got a boyfriend. He's upset because he doesn't have time with you and feels a loss of companionship," Willard says. "People often think cats urinate outside the box because they're doing it maliciously, but cats don't do it maliciously."

### 2. I've followed all the proper steps, so why does my cat still refuse to use the litterbox?

Your cat may associate the litterbox with negative experiences, Wright says. He uses humans and going to the dentist as

an example. If you've had only unpleasant experiences at the dentist, you may avoid going altogether. Cats can respond similarly. Cats suffering from urinary tract diseases, for example, may associate the litterbox with pain and discomfort and therefore avoid using it. In drastic cases such as these, Wright recommends changing as many of the environmental factors associated with the litterbox as possible, such as a new location, size, shape and the smells surrounding the litterbox. Continue to work with your veterinarian on different changes and consider consulting a behaviorist to devise a solution.

### 3. How do I get rid of litterbox odors?

Cleanliness is the primary force to banish litterbox odors. Scoop the box at least once a day and clean the litterbox with warm water and a mild dish soap at least once a week, Rockwell says. Avoid ammonia-type cleaners because cats dislike the ammonia scent. Next, try scented litters, but make sure your cat accepts them. Cats can develop aversions to foreign litters.

Rockwell also recommends scooping litter clumps whole instead of breaking them up. By breaking up clumps, you may miss some smaller pieces that can leave behind their smell. Odor-eliminating products are another option. These are sprinkled into the litter to bind to and absorb ammonia, but make sure your cat tolerates this.

### 4. How do I keep my floors litter-free?

Is it difficult to distinguish where the litterbox ends and your floors begin? Litter tracked around the area surrounding the litterbox is another frustrating complaint of cat owners. Besides regular vacuuming and/or sweeping, here are other alternatives.

"I know one thing that's really helped in my household is the plastic mats you can put right in front of the litterbox," Rockwell says.

Plastic or carpeted mats around the litterbox help catch the excess litter from your cat's trip from the box. Plastic liners and litterbox lids can prevent litter confetti from covering your floor, but the petroleum smell or confinement can offend some cats, so make sure your cat agrees with these products.

### 5. How can I stop the dogs from snacking in the litterbox?

Many people who live in multi-pet homes are all too familiar with catching their dogs dining on the cat's "leftovers." While a freshly scooped box is the best defense against this, dogs sometimes beat owners to it. A baby gate can resolve this problem, Rockwell says. Place the gate on the floor to block dogs but allow cats to jump over, or position it about a foot off the ground to allow cats to crawl under and still restrict larger dogs.

Another suggestion is to try a motion-sensor product that beeps, sprays or both, when dogs are near.

"It's an avoidance-learning task, so the dog isn't going and eating the cat biscuits anymore," Wright says. "And it works about half the time, about half of the clients say it works, which are pretty good statistics for a quick fix."

Litterbox problems may arise as changes occur within your home and your cat, but knowing these solutions to basic problems will help you understand and solve them.