

My Cat Won't Use the Litterbox

CatChannel veterinary expert Arnold Plotnick, DVM, discusses ways to make the litterbox more appealing.

By Arnold Plotnick, DVM

Posted: September 25, 2009, 3 a.m. EDT

Q: My cat is 1. I have a problem. She is peeing on plastic store bags. She pees in the litterbox sometimes. We brought her to the vet and they tested her to see if she had a urinary tract infection but they said she didn't. My mother wants to get rid of her because she is destroying our house. Please help me. I don't want to get rid of her.

A: When cats urinate outside their litterbox, it's usually either a medical problem, marking behavior, or a litterbox problem. I think you've effectively ruled out a medical problem if your vet tested your cat for a urinary tract infection. Marking behavior is possible; however, most cats mark by spraying urine on vertical surfaces, and your cat is doing it on horizontal surfaces, especially plastic bags.

I suspect your cat's inappropriate urination is occurring because your cat either doesn't like her litterbox, or she likes the spot she's urinating on more than her litterbox, or both. Your job now is to make the litterbox more appealing, and the spot she's going on less appealing.

You can make the litterbox more appealing by making sure it's always very clean. I'm not sure if you're cleaning it every day, but if not, you should. You also need to make sure there are enough litterboxes in the house. The magic number is $n+1$: there should be one more litterbox than there are cats in the house. If you have one cat, you should have two litterboxes. Studies have shown that cats prefer a box with no hood, and that they prefer unscented, clumping cat litter.

To make the spot she's going on less appealing, you need to remove the smell using an enzymatic cleaner that destroys the odor molecules. You can try to repel her from the spots she's going on by using Sticky Paws, which are big sheets of double-sided sticky tape. Cats dislike the way that this feels on their paws, and will often repel them from the spot. If the only spot she's using are those plastic bags, then your problem is easy enough to solve: don't leave any plastic bags lying around!

If environmental modification doesn't resolve the problem, as a last resort your vet can prescribe some psychoactive medications. These often cause cats to behave properly. In many cases, once the problem is resolved, the cat can be weaned off the medication.