

Kitty, Please Use the Litterbox!

Litterbox problems are among the most frustrating for cat owners. Learn how to solve current soiling situations and prevent future ones.

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Location is important in distinguishing between marking and toileting. Marking is done near windows, doors, and areas where encounters with other cats occur," Bergman said. "By contrast, with toileting issues, the deposits are usually in a more hidden location, such as behind the sofa or at the end of a dark, quiet hallway. Also, look for inciting factors. For example, marking may occur right after encounters with other indoor cats, after seeing cats outside, or may be more common at certain times of day, such as dawn and dusk.

Many medical conditions can first show up as a change in elimination patterns. Therefore, if a cat is not using its litterbox, particularly if this is a change from previously good habits, have its health checked by a veterinarian. For example, an older cat may have difficulty getting to the litterbox because of painful osteoarthritis. In fact, a change in litterbox habits may be the first sign of this painful condition seen by the owner.

Diabetes and other metabolic conditions also need to be considered. Very high on this list is bladder disease, known as Feline Urinary Syndrome (FUS) or Feline Interstitial Cystitis (FIC). Cats with FIC, which accounts for approximately 1.5 percent of cats seen by veterinarians, have frequent urination, pain and blood in the urine, and they urinate in places other than the litterbox. Stress seems to trigger FIC episodes, and cats with FIC seem to be more susceptible to stressful circumstances.

The LitterboxOther reasons a cat may fail to use its litterbox have to do with the litterbox itself. The litterbox might be too small, not stocked with a litter your cat likes, or not clean enough. It might also be in a bad location, such as a busy hallway, hidden behind a rumbling clothes drier, next to the cat's food (who wants to urinate next to their food?), too far away, in a difficult place to reach, or past a scary dog.

"And let's not forget about the dark," said Sharon Crowell-Davis, DVM, director of the Animal Behavior Service of the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine Behavior Service in Athens, Ga. "I have seen cats who used their litterbox in the day, but eliminated in other places at night. With one of these cats, it turned out the litterbox was in a closet in the basement and the cat had to negotiate stairs and make it clear through the basement in pitch dark to get to the litterbox. Yes, cats can see well in dim light, but they can't see in total darkness. Adding a night-light solved that problem."