

Cat Won't Use Litterbox

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains why a cat might not be using his litterbox.

By Marilyn Krieger, CCBC

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Q: I have three cats ... one is 2 years old; the other two are a year old. The 2-year-old, Beau, has suddenly started pooping outside the litterbox, but still urinates in it. I took a stool sample to the veterinarian, and there is no infestation, although the stool is a little soft. Yesterday, I saw Beau go over to the litterbox -- it was clean, he smelled the inside, then he seemed to be looking to scratch the floor and poop where he usually does, in the hall. Since I was following him to get him into the litterbox, he went downstairs and pooped in the other litterbox. What do you think is going on?

A: I am pleased that you took your cat to the veterinarian to rule out any possible medical issues that could be causing him not to use his litterbox. It's always very important to have cats checked out medically when there's a sudden change in behavior.

Many factors could be influencing your kitty to have less than ideal bathroom habits. Based on the information you provided, it appears that you have two boxes for three cats. The Golden Cat Box Rule is one box per cat and one for the house. Ideally, there should be four litterboxes for three cats. In your case, I think one of the main triggers is not enough boxes and less than ideal locations for the boxes you do have.

Cats are fastidious in their habits and need very clean boxes. The boxes need to be scooped at least once a day, and they should be uncovered. Along with retaining odors, covered boxes can cause a cat to feel trapped, since there's only one way in and out of the box. Most covered boxes are also too small for cats. I counsel my clients to use the 66-quart Sterilite Clearview storage containers with no tops. These boxes are big enough to accommodate even plus size kitties, and with the tall sides, cleanup is a little easier. Senior and special needs cats might be challenged by the height and might need one side cut down or shallower boxes. Sterilite boxes also are translucent, allowing cats to see any perceived threats. The boxes need to be located in areas where a cat can see who is approaching in the room and out the door. Closets and small bathrooms are not good locations for litterboxes since cats can feel trapped with no escape routes.

The four litterboxes need to be scattered throughout the house. Cats like to have litterbox choices for several reasons: one box might not be as clean as another; the cat might feel uncomfortable and insecure in a particular location; convenience, etc. Additionally, in a multi-cat household, it is not uncommon for cats to "resource guard." It's easy to recognize resource guarding cats. They usually sit or lie directly in the path to the litterbox, making it uncomfortable for other cats to walk by them to use the preferred litterbox.