

My Kittens Have Inappropriate Elimination Issues

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger discusses litterbox habits and how to get cats to go in the right place.

By Marilyn Krieger

Posted: April 3, 2009, 3 a.m. EDT

Q: I own two 9-month-old kittens. The male is fixed and the female will be spayed soon. There are three cat boxes in the house and they are cleaned every other day. Both cats use the boxes during the day but on occasion, I find they have defecated and urinated on my counters during the night. Why are they doing this? Originally it was only once a week, but lately it's become more frequent. I'd love to break them of this habit. My son loves them very much but if I can't stop the behavior, I will have to get rid of them for obvious health reasons. Any advice would be appreciated.

A: Unfortunately, inappropriate elimination is the most common reason people needlessly surrender cats to shelters. It is also one of the primary reasons people seek my help as a cat-behavior consultant. The good news is that with a few environmental changes, a little work and patience it is a fixable problem. The first step to solving the problem is finding the causes or triggers of the behavior.

When cats have inappropriate elimination challenges it is important to rule out any diseases or medical conditions that could be causing them to not use their litterboxes. These include urinary tract infections, parasites and diabetes, as well as others. After the veterinarian rules out medical problems, we look for behavior triggers.

It is possible that either one or both of your cats are on strike since you are not cleaning the cat boxes every day. Cats are meticulously clean and many will not use litterboxes that aren't scooped at least once a day. Another common trigger is the cat litter itself. Avoid scented litters. They may smell pleasant to people, but most cats aren't thrilled with the smell. Since a cat's nose is much more finely tuned than a human's, smells from a litterbox can cause them to seek other places for their bathrooms. Cats prefer using litterboxes that have no odors and are cleaned every day.

The size and type of litterboxes are important for maintaining good habits. Boxes should be large and uncovered. Covered boxes retain odors and cats can feel trapped inside of them. Additionally, most commercial boxes are too small and cramped. I recommend the large 66-quart translucent storage boxes with no cover that are 12 inches deep. Cats can see out of them and since the sides of the boxes are tall, cat litter, for the most part, remains inside of the box.

From the description of the targeted areas, it is possible that your litterboxes are not placed in ideal locations. Cats like choices. Don't put all of the litterboxes together in one room; put them in different places throughout the house. Closets, laundry rooms and bathrooms are not good spots for litterboxes since cats can feel trapped in those locations and odors have a tendency to linger. Good litterbox locations are areas where a cat won't feel trapped and can see the whole room and out the door into the next room or hall. If at all possible, consider placing a litterbox in the same room where the cats are inappropriately eliminating.

There might be other reasons that your cats prefer eliminating at night on the counters instead of inside their litterboxes. Without more detailed information, it is impossible to determine what the other triggers might be.