

My Cat Is Pooping Outside the Litterbox

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger discusses ways to help a senior cat use the litterbox.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: We have a 20-year-old female cat who pees in her box (she has four) but poops on the rug or under the table. This pooping has begun only in the past few months and has gotten worse. Now she never poops in the box at all. On at least one occasion I caught her getting ready to poop on the carpet, two feet from her living-room box. I put her in the box, and she got out and proceeded to poop on the carpet.

A: You are lucky to have a cat who has lived 20 years, free of major medical ailments. Treasure her, she sounds lovely. Older cats are wonderful but at times they need special considerations since they can suffer from behavior and medical challenges that are age-related.

Before determining this is a behavior problem, please take your cat to a veterinarian for a geriatric exam. It is important to rule out any possible medical issues that she might have that could be causing her not to use the box. She might have parasites, or she may have constipation issues that are causing her to associate the litterbox with pain. It is also possible that she has arthritis and is finding it painful to defecate in the box.

Another concern is her fur length. If she has long or medium-length fur, consider giving her a trim under the tail area. Cats are very clean; they do not like the feel of litter or other remnants sticking to them.

It is not uncommon for elderly cats to develop varying degrees of incontinence and sometimes confusion as they age. Add new and different types of boxes for her. Instead of using conventional litterboxes, provide her with large storage boxes (the type used for storage under the bed) that have no covers and are shallow. It is important that you leave the existing boxes in their original locations for consistency. Later, after she's using the new boxes you can slowly take away the unused boxes. After putting fresh litter in the new cat boxes, add a couple of cups of used litter from the original boxes. Her new, shallow boxes need to be located in different areas of the house so that they are near her when she gets the urge.

If your cat continues not using any of the boxes for defecating, consider investing in puppy piddle pads and placing them in front of the cat boxes. The pads are made out of a soft absorbent material that doesn't leak and make accident clean up fast and easy.