



SOLVING BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

Litter Box Aversion

One of the more frequent problems that cat owners face is their cat refusing to use the litter box, even after using it for years in the past. This behavior may be corrected with proper attention to the cat's health and environment.

Do NOT yell or strike your cat if he or she does not use the litter box. Litter box problems are almost always temporary and reversible, but a cat can develop litter box aversion if he associates elimination with punishment. Animals don't understand punishment after the fact. If you are lucky enough to catch her in the act, interrupt by making a startling noise, but be careful not to scare her. Immediately take her to where the litter box is located, and set her on the floor. If she wanders over to the litter box, wait and praise her after she eliminates in the box. If she takes off in another direction, she may want privacy, so watch from afar until she goes back to the litter box and uses it, then praise her when she does. If she doesn't go to it, consider isolating her in the bathroom with the litter box for a time.

- Physical Problems. Rule out a physical problem by bringing your cat to a veterinarian for a physical examination. Common medical causes for inappropriate elimination is a urinary tract infection or crystals in the urine, both of which make urination very painful. Cats often associate this pain with the litter box and begin to avoid it. Left untreated, these can cause permanent damage or be fatal.
- Environment Problems. Cats may stop using the litter box because of a radical change in their surroundings, such as the introduction of a new pet, rearranging furnishings, remodeling, or even a new baby. In cases such as these, it is best to ease the transition by following the same procedures recommended for introducing a pet to a new home: start in a confined, isolated space and gradually let your cat explore her new surroundings.
- Litter Problems. Cats may stop using the litter box because they are dissatisfied with the type of box or litter you use. A change in the box or the litter can cause them to stop using it; try and stay consistent for the life of the cat. Additionally, a change in litter box location may cause dissatisfaction. Be prepared to experiment and slowly rule things out.

Steps to Avoid Litter Box Aversion

- Cleanliness. Keep the litter box extremely clean. Scoop at least once a day and change the litter completely every week (for non-clumping litter) or every two weeks (for clumping litter). You may need to change the litter box more or less frequently depending on the size of the box and the number of cats in the house. Cats have an extremely sensitive sense of smell, so if you can smell the box, from the cat's perspective, it really must reek. You should have at least one litter box for every two cats.
- Location. Keep the litter box away from locations with noisy appliances. Cats, like people, like privacy.
- Emergency Exits. If one of your pets enjoys ambushing your cat when he leaves the litter box, try to create more than one exit from the litter box, so that your cat always has an escape route.
- Surface Preferences. If your cat is eliminating on soft surfaces, try using a high quality, scoopable litter, and put a soft rug under the litter box. If your cat is eliminating on slick, smooth surfaces, try putting just a very thin layer at one end of the box, leaving the other end bare, and put the box on a hard floor. If your cat has a history of being outdoors, add some soil or sod to the litter box.

- Defensive Maneuvers. Make the area where your cat has been eliminating aversive to her by covering it with an upside-down carpet runner, aluminum foil, or citrus-scented cotton balls.

Biting and Scratching

When cats become overly excited during play with humans, they usually bite and start to scratch. This behavior can be avoided with training.

- Biting. When the cat bites too hard, let him know that he is hurting you by shouting “OUCH.” Walk away and end the play session immediately. Cats, especially kittens, love to play, especially with their humans. Ending a play session is an extremely effective punishment. The cat soon learns that it is his own rough behavior that causes an abrupt end of an enjoyable play session.
- Scratching. Whenever your cat gets her claws out, stopping the play session often causes the cat to retract her claws. If she does, praise her and resume playing. If she doesn't, sternly say, “No claws, kitty!” At this stage, the cat will have no idea what you are saying, but she will learn that the play session doesn't resume until her claws are retracted. If she doesn't retract after this, walk away and end the play session.
- Defensive Maneuvers. Provide your cat with acceptable ways to expend her energy and act out her predatory nature. Tie a feather or piece of crumpled paper to a length of string and run around the house, dragging it behind you. This gives your cat a moving target to attack. Let your cat pounce on it instead of your hands or feet. Scratching posts, games of fetch, and active and regular play sessions will all encourage good behavior in your kitty.