



# PAWS<sup>®</sup> CHICAGO

## LITTER BOX AVOIDANCE

### CONGRATULATIONS ON ADOPTING YOUR NEW FAMILY MEMBER!

There are several things which can contribute to a cat's inability to successfully use her litter box some or all of the time. If your cat stops using the litter box consistently to urinate or defecate, make an appointment for a veterinary exam as soon as possible. Many cats stop using their litter boxes due to an underlying medical condition. Before looking into behavioral reasons for your cat's litter box avoidance, it is essential that you first rule out an underlying medical cause under the direction of your veterinarian.

Non-medical reasons for litter box avoidance typically fall into one of the following categories: litter box maintenance; location preference; and/or environmental stressors.

## Litter Box Maintenance

Cats are very clean animals. Scooping your cat's litter box at least 1-2 times a day, every day, is recommended. Completely disposing of your cat's old litter, cleaning the empty box, and refilling it with new litter should be done every 2-3 weeks. If you notice a strong odor coming from the box or find that the litter is not clumping well, you may need to change the litter more frequently.

Avoid using harsh chemicals or cleansers when cleaning your litter box. Cleaning your litter box with a mild, unscented dish detergent or just hot water is preferable, since many cats dislike the smell of bleach and other disinfectants.



**Scoop 1-2  
times daily**



**Dispose of litter  
every 2-3 weeks**



**Avoid harsh  
chemicals**

## Number of Boxes

The general rule-of-thumb is to have one box for every cat in a household plus an extra. Some cats prefer to urinate in one box and defecate in another. In multi-cat households, extra boxes can prevent one cat from "guarding" the litter box from his companion cats. If you live in a home with multiple levels, a box should be placed on every floor that the cat can access.



Prevent litter box guarding by having multiple boxes in different areas of the home. Two boxes per cat, and one box on each floor of a multi-level home, is the general rule-of-thumb.

# Types of Boxes

## COVERED VS. UNCOVERED

Many cats also prefer an uncovered box. Covered boxes tend to retain odors (similar to an outdoor porta potty). Some cats may also feel insecure when using a covered box since they don't have a clear view of their surroundings. If your cat doesn't feel like he can see potential threats, he may choose a different location to eliminate that makes him feel less vulnerable. Also, self-cleaning boxes may be more convenient for cat owners, but the noise can frighten some cats and lead them to find other elimination locations.



Many cats prefer an uncovered box. They feel more secure with a clear view of their surroundings.



Covered boxes tend to retain more odors than uncovered boxes. You may need to clean your covered box more often than if using an uncovered box.

## BOX SIZE

Box size is also important. The box should ideally be about 1.5 times the length of your cat, so he can easily turn his entire body around in the box. As your cat gets older, he may need a box with lower sides if it becomes hard for him to climb into the box easily.



Your cat may not be able to use the box successfully if it's too small.



Litter box too small? Convert a storage container to a size more suitable for your cat. Cut one side down, so the cat can enter and exit the box easily.

# Litter Type

The type of litter or substrate that your cat prefers varies with each cat. As a general rule, most cats do not like scented litters. Additionally, fine-grained clumping litters are usually preferred over those with large particles, pellets, or crystals. In the wild, cats gravitate toward sand or dirt for elimination substrates, and litters whose textures are closer to that tend to be favored by many cats.

Avoid plastic litter box liners. Liners make clean up much easier for cat owners, but your cat's nails can easily get caught in the plastic material.



Many cats prefer a fine to medium-grained, unscented clumping litter. Experiment to see which type of litter your cat prefers.

## LITTER BOX AVOIDANCE

# Location

- Keep multiple boxes in separate locations. This is especially important if you have a multi-cat household in order to prevent litter box guarding.
- Litter boxes should be kept in a location separate from your cat's food and water stations. Like most people, cats do not like to eliminate in the same spot where they eat and drink.
- Cats tend to prefer an easily accessible litter box that gives them a clear view of their surroundings. Cats are both a prey and predatory species. As such, they will feel most comfortable if they can clearly see what they may perceive as potential threats approaching them.
- Avoid placing boxes in high-traffic areas of the home. If there is too much commotion, your cat may not be able to relax enough to use the litter box, and he may seek out other locations.
- Avoid placing the box near washers, dryers, or other noisy appliances that could frighten the cat and cause him to avoid that location all together.
- Keeping air fresheners near your cat's box may also deter him from using the box.
- Boxes placed near windows can also be problematic if it enables cats or wildlife from the outside to see into your own cat's home. Visual contact with animals outside the home can frighten the cat and deter him from using the box because of its location.



Litter boxes that are "hidden" may be aesthetically pleasing for cat owners, but locations that limit the cat's ability to see his surroundings may make your cat feel vulnerable and less likely to use his box consistently.



Place boxes in low-traffic areas of the home that provide your cat with privacy and a clear view of his surroundings.



Some cats will avoid using boxes placed in high-traffic areas of the home, boxes placed near views of the outside, or boxes placed next to noisy appliances that turn on unexpectedly.

# Environmental Stressors

Cats tend to do best with a consistent and predictable schedule. If they can rely on regularly scheduled meal times and play sessions, they feel more secure than with an erratic home environment.

Ask yourself if there have been any significant changes to your cat's home environment or routine. New additions to the family (animal or human), changes in your work schedule, moving to a new residence, more time spent outside the home, or even rearranging furniture can sometimes stress out cats and lead to litter box avoidance.



If an environmental stressor is inadvertently causing your cat to eliminate outside the litter box, contact your adoption counselor. We may be able to provide strategies for helping your cat adjust to changes in his routine or environment.

# Cleaning Up Messes

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A cat's sense of smell is extremely strong. We recommend purchasing an enzymatic cleaner that can break down the chemical compounds in cat urine that produce its particular smell. If the odor is not removed entirely, your cat may continue to eliminate in the same spot again and again. Any major pet store will have enzymatic cleaners. A popular brand is called "Nature's Miracle." Be sure to follow the instructions exactly.

Unfortunately, if the cat has eliminated on the carpet or a sofa cushion again and again, these items may need to be replaced. Many cat owners purchase black lights that can be used to identify all areas in the home in need of a thorough cleaning.



Enzymatic cleaners break down the uric acid in your cat's urine. These cleaners eradicate odors that your cat can smell, even if you don't.

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*If your cat is experiencing litter box aversion, please contact us at [adoptions@pawschicago.org](mailto:adoptions@pawschicago.org) or [emayes@pawschicago.org](mailto:emayes@pawschicago.org). We can direct you to someone who can help.*