



# What to do if your cat is not using the litterbox



If your cat is not using the litterbox consistently, the first thing for you to know is, you are not alone! Out-of-box elimination is one of the most common ways cats have of letting us know that something isn't right. *But what could it be?* Don't blame yourself (or your cat!) if you've tried to figure it out and the problem persists. Inappropriate elimination is frequently brought on by discomfort that arises from an underlying medical issue, a problem with the litterbox/bathroom area, or another type of anxiety or stress. The actual source of distress is often difficult for cat owners to recognize and understand, let alone fix.

Enlisting a professional will greatly increase your chances of resolving the issue quickly and successfully. But if you want to investigate some of the more obvious reasons your cat may not be using the box before you make that call, the following guidelines will get you started.

## ***BEGIN by taking your cat to the vet to rule out underlying disease.***

Urinary tract infection and kidney-related issues are most often associated with changes in cat elimination behavior, but any medical condition - from allergies to cancer - may cause out-of-box behavior. If disease is found, follow your vet's prescribed treatment.

If your vet gives you the all-clear, your next step is to investigate potential environmental stressors, especially those that may be related to the litterbox.

*P.S. Always remember to stay current with your cat's veterinary examinations and care.*

## ***NEXT, consider your cat's litter.***

Cats prefer litter that is small, light, clumping and unscented. Look for a clay-based litter with strong and effective odor-control, such as those containing activated carbon.

Cats generally prefer a litter depth of around 4", but your cat may prefer more or less. Pay attention to your cat's habits to determine the best depth for your cat.

Note that litters made from materials such as corn, wheat, walnut or wood can turn cats off due to their smell and texture.



## Ask yourself the following questions. If the answer is no, make a change!

### Is my cat's litterbox in an area that is...?

**Well-lit.** Cats need light to navigate easily both day and night. If necessary, provide extra lighting for your cat.

**Close-by and easy-to-access.** The path to the litterbox should be straightforward and free of clutter or obstacles, such as storage boxes or clothing. If your cat has to navigate a long way or around, through or over things to get to the litterbox, she might choose another spot.

**Quiet.** Unexpected noises, as from an appliance, can disturb your cat and leave them feeling that the litterbox is unsafe.

**Away from your cats food, water, toys and perches.** Cats may refuse to eliminate where they eat, play and rest.

### Is the litterbox...?

**Large-enough.** Most litterboxes are too small and prevent cats from engaging in natural elimination behaviors. This can cause a lot of stress! Avoid this situation by ensuring their box is wide and at least as long as they are from tip of nose to tip of tail. Enclosed boxes pose a risk because they force cats to squeeze and duck in the box, inhibiting normal posturing.

**Clean.** You don't like the smell of urine or feces and you definitely do not want to have to step around it to use the toilet. Neither does your cat! Scoop the box at least once daily or as often as needed for it to stay clean and clump-free. If you have more than one cat, or your cat simply has more elimination waste, you will need more than one litterbox.

**Easy for your cat to walk right into and out of.** Do not use a litterbox that requires cat acrobatics, such as top-loading boxes that require a cat to jump in and out.

**Open.** Cats prefer boxes that have more than one entrance and exit point. Open boxes provide this while also allowing for more flexibility when it comes to posturing in the box. Enclosed boxes are dark, dusty, tend to hold smell and require cats to scrunch when they eliminate - all things that may cause your cat to choose another spot.

**Free of accessories such as liners or additives.** These items can negatively impact the smell and feel of the litterbox.

## Things You Need to Know

- Cats need plenty of opportunity to exercise their body and their brain. Make sure you are dedicating time daily to play with, pet and train your kitty. Bored cats are stressed cats, and a stressed cat is at risk for inconsistent litterbox behavior.
- Your cat may be reacting to another stressor that is more difficult to identify, such as changes in or around the household or daily routine; the addition of a new pet, or other types of anxiety. Your best chance at diagnosis and resolution is to reach out to a feline behavior professional for advice.
- Be aware that your cat is not choosing to eliminate on your belongings out of vengeance or because he is mad at or resentful of you. This is not the way cats think.
- The fact that your cat has always used the litterbox consistently in the past, does not mean they always will. Cats experience physical and mental changes throughout their lives, just like we do, and a bathroom setup that may have been comfortable before may need to be changed as a natural result of your cats growth, development and lifestage.
- Don't be afraid to call a feline behavior professional. Working with someone who has expertise in feline behavior is often the best, fastest, and sometimes the only, way to find an effective solution for you and your kitty.



## Resources

**One inexpensive option for a larger-sized litterpan is a 20x26 cement mixing tub, available at Lowes online or in-stores.**

**Find a certified cat behavior consultant at [thatcatgirl.com](http://thatcatgirl.com) or [iaabc.org](http://iaabc.org).**