

# How to Provide Litterbox Hygiene to Reduce the Stimulus for Inappropriate Elimination (Cats)

## BACKGROUND

*Inappropriate elimination* refers to urination or defecation by a cat in the home in a location that is unacceptable to humans, namely somewhere outside the litterbox. Inappropriate elimination can be due to many different factors, and should not be confused with marking behavior (“spraying”) of male cats. Medical disorders of the urinary or digestive system can cause inappropriate elimination, and behavioral disorders are also a common cause. For these reasons, inappropriate elimination should prompt a veterinary visit and the necessary tests and treatments based on the underlying cause.

One of the most important aspects of inappropriate elimination is the litterbox environment. Providing a litterbox your cat(s) find(s) acceptable is a cornerstone of preventing inappropriate elimination. Many cats will not change their inappropriate elimination habits without this, so giving them a hygienic litterbox can preemptively help avoid inappropriate elimination in the first place. This should be understood and applied at the outset by all individuals and families who wish to have a clean home and a good relationship with their cat.

Fortunately, most or all of the methods and recommendations described here can be accomplished with materials that can be obtained easily.

Factors that may cause cats to urinate outside the litterbox include:

- Medical disorders of the kidneys or bladder
- Hormone imbalances
- Temperament
- New cat in the neighborhood or home
- Scent of another cat on a visitor’s clothes
- Change in environment
- Owner absence from the home
- Owner spending less time with the cat
- Inappropriate punishment
- Arthritis
- Unfamiliar or undesirable type of litter
- Litterbox that is too small
- Litterbox that is covered by a hood or lid
- Litterbox that has a plastic liner
- Litterbox that is in an unacceptable or undesirable location

## GETTING STARTED

Equipment/materials needed:

- Extra litterboxes
- Different types of litter

## TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

Avoid punishment. It is always counterproductive. If a cat is caught in action, a water spray bottle may be used for interrupting the behavior, but verbal reprimands or yelling, striking, or any physical punishment at any time can consistently be expected to produce no improvement whatsoever and commonly can worsen the behavior, leading to increased inappropriate elimination and ultimately, abandonment of the cat instead of identification of the problem and application of a solution.

If two cats are consistently aggressive toward one another, inappropriate elimination may be part of a larger aggressive

disorder. You should discuss this with your veterinarian, as resolving the conflict could then bring about improvement or disappearance of the inappropriate elimination.

Similarly, pattern repetition can offer a clue to the underlying triggers for inappropriate elimination. Identifying the circumstances (place, time, who is around the home, what has happened recently) when inappropriate elimination takes place can help greatly. Your veterinarian should review this information; he/she may refer you to a veterinary behaviorist for a consultation ([www.veterinarybehaviorists.org](http://www.veterinarybehaviorists.org)). These specialist veterinarians are experts at determining the causes of inappropriate elimination and providing solutions that are practical and as likely to succeed as anything else.

Finally, avoid jumping to conclusions. It is a very common mistake for people to misinterpret the underlying cause of inappropriate elimination as “revenge” or “spite,” or to jump to conclusions about needing to relinquish the cat because no solution seems to have worked, when in fact many options for altering or resolving the condition still exist. You should be sure to mention inappropriate elimination to your veterinarian before exasperation sets in.

## PROCEDURE

Experience shows that the following approaches bring out varying results from cat to cat. What works for one cat may not work for another, and the path to figuring out the best solution for inappropriate elimination is to implement one, see how it works, and if the results are not adequate, to move on to a second one.

- Be sure there are enough litterboxes. The minimum number of litterboxes in the home should be the number of cats in the home plus one. For example, a single-cat household should have at least two litterboxes, and a three-cat household should have at least four litterboxes.
- Avoid litterbox liners (plastic bags that lie underneath the litter); some cats eliminate outside the litterbox simply because of these.
- Similarly, avoid scented litter.
- Avoid enclosed litterboxes (those with lids that create walls and a roof to the litterbox). Cats can feel confined in these and choose to eliminate where they don’t feel boxed in. Ventilation is generally poor in enclosed litterboxes, and the cover may discourage you from cleaning the box as frequently.
- Try different types of litter: some cats dislike certain types and choose the carpet/bedding/clothes/other simply because it is less repellent to them. Wood shavings, pelleted recycled newspaper litter, clay litter, and clumping litter are some routinely available varieties.
- Try different amounts of litter. A litterbox does not have to be filled halfway to the brim with litter. Some cats prefer less litter, others more. Using a 2” (5 cm)-thick layer of litter, rather than two or three times more, makes it easier for you to clean the litterbox weekly without feeling like a large amount of litter is being wasted. During the week, you can top it off as needed rather than winding up dumping a large amount of litter at the end of the week.
- Be sure the litterboxes are large enough. Some cats will only use a litterbox that is longer in length and width than the full length of their own body (including the tail!). Research has

shown that cats prefer a litterbox that is at least 1.5 times the length of the cat in both length and width. This is longer than virtually all commercially available litterboxes, meaning that an opportunity exists for reducing inappropriate elimination by making a litterbox from lumber or converting another pan or vessel to become a large litterbox.

- If you notice that elimination is taking place on a specific type of surface (“substrate”) consistently, try adding a litterbox that replicates this surface, near an area where the inappropriate elimination is occurring. For example, if your cat eliminates on smooth floor at the same location consistently, place an empty litterbox (smooth bottom) directly beside this location.
- Probably the most important thing to do is litterbox cleaning. Every litterbox in the house should be scooped at least once a day. Cats can be extremely picky by nature (dogs certainly don’t spend as much time cleaning themselves as cats do, for example), and inappropriate elimination may simply reflect disgust with a smelly or soiled litterbox.
  - Scoop feces and clumped urine at least once daily.
  - Clean each litterbox (dump the litter and wash and rinse the litterbox completely) at least once a week, or more often if using non-clumping litter, where urine permeates the litter.
  - If disposing of clumped litter and feces daily is inconvenient (for example, you live on the top floor of an apartment building and the main trash container is in the basement), one option is to have a 1 gallon (4 liter) Ziploc-type bag beside the litterbox and to dump the scooped materials into that, seal, store in a receptacle (such as a dedicated trash can just beside the litterbox) and dispose when the bag is full.
- Identify locations where cat(s) spend the most time, and place litterboxes nearby with easy and direct route of access for the cat. One pitfall that can lead to inappropriate elimination is placing a litterbox in a location that is convenient but turns out to be near a location preferred by a competitor (other cat, family dog) or is unpleasant to the cat (such as beside a noisy clothes dryer, for example). As a result, the cat feels that access to the litterbox is blocked, and inappropriate elimination takes place elsewhere by default.
- Use good-quality scent eliminators (such as Anti-Icky-Poo [AIP]) to remove the scent of inappropriately eliminated urine or feces from the surface on which it was deposited.
- In a multi-cat household, one cat may be dominated by another, which prevents the less dominate cat from using the

litterbox. This is one of the reasons there must be at least one litterbox per cat, plus one extra. This allows the less dominant cat to seek other litterboxes when needed.

- Feline pheromones are airborne scents that provide a calming effect. Their benefits in cats with inappropriate elimination are unproven, but they may help to some small degree by providing a soothing, stress-reducing effect.

## AFTERWARDS

Behavior-modifying medications can be used for controlling inappropriate elimination when it is caused by certain behavioral disorders; however, most drugs are not approved for use in cats. Drugs also can produce side effects, so behavior modification should be tried first.

It is important to remove stool and urine odor as quickly as possible from the area of inappropriate elimination so the cat does not come to believe that it is acceptable to have that area smelling of urine or feces.

Modifying a cat’s behavior can be time consuming and frustrating. The length of time the problem has occurred, the number of cats in the house, the removal of stimuli, the number of surfaces that have been soiled, the temperament of your pet, and your own time constraints and abilities may affect the outcome. The most valuable resource that saves these cats from an unhappy dynamic in the home or relinquishment to a shelter/euthanasia is patience on your part and a willingness to try a number of different approaches and changes.



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