



Best Behavior - Good Litter Box Habits for Cats



Location: The litter box should be kept in a spot that gives your cat some privacy yet is also conveniently located. Improper placement alone can cause your cat to not use the box. Most people are inclined to place the litter box in an out-of-the-way spot to minimize odor and prevent cat litter from being tracked throughout the house. If you place the litter box in a closet or a bathroom, be sure the door is wedged open from both sides to prevent her from being trapped inside or locked out. Depending on the location, you might consider cutting a hole in a closet door and adding a pet door.

Litter Type: Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained litters, presumably because they have a softer feel. The scoopable (clumping) litters are convenient to maintain and usually have finer grains than the typical clay litter. The higher quality clay litters are small grained and relatively dust free. It is recommended that you do not use the least expensive litter, pellet type litters, or those made from citrus peels. Also, many cats are put off by the odor of scented or deodorant litters. For the same reason, it's not a good idea to place a room deodorizer or air freshener near the litter box. The litter brand that's on sale or smells the nicest to you could result in your cat not using the litter box. Once you find a litter your cat likes, stick with it. A thin layer of baking soda placed on the bottom of the box will help absorb odors without repelling your cat, and odors shouldn't really be a problem if you keep the litter box clean. If *you* find the litter box odor offensive, your cat probably finds it even more offensive and won't want to use it. If problems occur, remember to consider the location, number of boxes, type of litter, and cleanliness of the box and try adjusting any of these.

How Many Boxes: It is recommended that you have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats. That way, none of them will ever be prevented from eliminating in the litter box because it's already occupied. You might also consider placing litter boxes in several locations around the house, so that no one cat can prevent the other cats from getting access. It also is recommended that you place at least one litter box on each level of your house. Many cats use any litter box that's available and another cat may occasionally refuse to use a litter box after another cat has used it. In this case, all of the litter boxes will need to be kept extremely clean and additional boxes may be needed. You and your cat(s) may prefer to use a covered litter box, but observe your cats behavior, some cats may prefer one that is not covered. You may want to experiment by offering both types.

Potential Problems of Covered Litter Boxes:

- You may forget to clean the litter box as frequently as you should because the dirty litter is not seen.
- A covered litter box traps odors inside, so it will need to be cleaned more often than an open one.
- A covered litter box may not allow a large cat enough room to turn around, scratch, dig, or position itself in the way it wants.
- A covered litter box may make it easier for another cat to lay in wait to ambush the user as the cat exits the box.

Keeping the Box Clean: Feces should be scooped out of the litter box daily. How often you actually change (replace) the litter depends on the number of cats you have, the number of litter boxes, and the type of litter you use. Twice a week is a general guideline for clay litter, but depending on the circumstances, you may need to replace it every other day or only once a week. If you clean the litter box daily, scoopable litter may only need to be changed every two to three weeks. If you notice an odor or if much of the litter is wet or clumped, it's time for a change. Don't use strong smelling chemicals or cleaning products when washing the litter box, as doing so may cause your cat to avoid the box. Some cleaning products are toxic to cats – read the labels. Washing with soap and water is usually sufficient.

Liner or Not: Some cats don't mind having a plastic liner in the litter box, while others do. Again, you may want to experiment to see if your cat is bothered by a liner in the box. If you do use a liner, make sure it's anchored in place, so it can't easily catch your cat's claws or be pulled out of place.

How Much Litter: Most cats won't use litter that's more than about two inches deep. In fact, some long-haired cats actually prefer less litter and a smooth, slick surface, such as the bottom of the litter box. A litter box needs to be cleaned on a regular basis, and adding extra litter is not a way around that chore.

"Litter-Training" Cats: A cat doesn't need to be taught what to do with a litter box because instinct will generally take over. The only thing you need to do is provide an acceptable, accessible litter box, and follow the suggestions previously mentioned. It's not necessary to take your cat to the litter box and move her paws back and forth in the litter; in fact, this is not recommended, as such an unpleasant experience is likely to initiate a negative association with the litter box.

If Problems Develop: If your cat has been using the litter box and begins to eliminate in areas other than the box, your first call should always be to your veterinarian. Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cat's litter box habits. If your veterinarian determines that your cat is healthy, the cause may be a simple behavior problem that can be resolved by using behavior modification techniques. Punishment is not the answer, and do not even consider sending your cat outdoors. For long-standing or complex situations, contact an animal behavior specialist who has experience working with cats. The Friends have a pet behavior expert who may be able to provide helpful information.