



Solving Litter Box Problems

For a cat owner, dealing with a cat who is peeing and/or pooping outside of the litter box can be so frustrating that the owner ends up surrendering the cat to an animal shelter or rescue group. Adopting out such a cat is not always easy, but it is doable when foster caregivers work as a team with shelter or rescue group staff to solve the problem. Sometimes a change of environment is all that is needed to restore good litter box habits. Spaying and neutering, treating medical conditions, and/or implementing behavioral modification strategies can also put a stop to inappropriate litter box use. Even with the tougher cases where the problem is not fully resolved, these cats can still be adopted out as barn cats.

Definitions

- **Inappropriate elimination** is when a cat pees and/or poops outside of the litter box. This can have medical and/or behavioral causes.
- **Urine marking** is when a cat sprays pee on vertical surfaces, usually smaller amounts of pee. It is most commonly associated with cats who are not spayed or neutered. It can also be caused by cat-to-cat conflict, as well as outdoor stressors.

Issues Related to Owner Surrender

- Research has shown that peeing and/or pooping outside of the litter box is the #1 **behavioral** reason for owner surrender of cats to shelters.
- Disclosure of inappropriate litter box use won't always happen. The owner is often concerned that if the shelter or rescue group knows about the problem, the end result will be euthanasia or refusal to take the cat.
- This is why it is important for intake staff to create a welcoming and helpful atmosphere that encourages the owner to share information. History is important, it will be helpful with trying to resolve the issue before the cat is made available for adoption. Staff should start with the most important question... has the cat been seen by a veterinarian for the litter box problems?



Causes of Peeing/Pooping Outside the Litter Box

- One of the main causes of peeing outside of the litter box is urine marking by cats who are not spayed or neutered.
- Cats may pee or poop outside of the box due to medical problems that cause discomfort or pain during peeing or pooping. They begin to associate this discomfort with the litter box and start avoiding its use. Medical conditions can also create an urgency to pee and poop, causing the cat to not make it to the litter box in time.
 - A urinary tract infection can cause discomfort or pain while peeing, and can create an urgency to pee frequent small amounts.
 - Diabetes, hyperthyroidism, and kidney problems can all cause excessive water drinking and a subsequent increase in the volume of pee, creating an urgency to pee.
 - Diarrhea can cause an urgency to poop.
 - Constipation and full anal glands can cause discomfort.
 - Older cats with arthritis may also have trouble climbing in and out of the litter box.
- There are many behavioral causes of peeing and/or pooping outside of the litter box.
 - Stress: Most often occurs in shy and fearful cats, but can also happen in cats who have been exposed to environmental changes, such as new people or pets moving in or remodeling of the home.
 - Conflict: May happen when a cat does not get along with another pet in the household, or when he or she sees another cat outside the window.
 - Litter box issues: The cat may not like the litter box, its type, or its location. The cat may have a strong preference for a certain type of litter, or may be very picky about not using a dirty litter box.

Solutions:

1) Spay or Neuter

- If a cat is unaltered, spaying or neutering him or her is often all that is needed to resolve the problem of peeing outside of the litter box.

2) Rule Out or Treat Medical Conditions

- A critical first step is to rule out or treat medical conditions that are causing or contributing to the peeing and/or pooping outside of the litter box. Otherwise, other solutions to the problem will have little to no effect.
- Ruling out medical conditions starts with a physical exam.



- Depending on the resources of a shelter or rescue group, diagnostics may be performed. A urinalysis is easy and inexpensive to run in house. Bloodwork, x-rays, urine culture, and ultrasound are all more expensive and may need to be reserved for cats showing more severe clinical symptoms such as straining to pee, or excessive water drinking and peeing.
- If any medical conditions are found, they need to be treated. This may be as simple as a round of antibiotics to clear up a urinary tract infection, or as complicated as surgery to remove bladder stones.

3) Reduce Stress

- Introduce the cat to new pets and people slowly.
- Provide plenty of hiding places and vertical space, so that the cat has a place to retreat to where he or she feels safe.
- Avoid exposure to noise and chaos.

4) Address Conflicts

- Address any conflict with other pets or people, anything that is making the cat fearful or angry.
- It is possible that the cat may need to be the only pet in a potential adopter's household, or may need to live in a house without children.
- Block the cat's view of outdoor cats by closing doors and using window covering.
- Outdoor cat deterrents such as motion activated sprinklers are also an option.

5) Good Litter Box Hygiene

- This is a must. Cats do not like dirty litter boxes!
- Scoop litter boxes at least once daily.
- Wash litter boxes with soap and water and refill them with fresh litter as needed, depending on how dirty they get. Once every 1-2 weeks should be sufficient.

6) Make the Litter Box Type Attractive

- Avoid covered litter boxes and top entry litter boxes. Many cats feel trapped or cornered in boxes that are not open.
- Do not use litter box liners. They may snag on toenails and some cats may not like the strong smell of plastic.
- Do not use litter boxes that are too small. Large, roomy litter boxes are a good choice. The bottom part of a plastic "under the bed" storage tub is inexpensive and works well.



- Litter boxes with low sides are best for kittens and geriatric cats. They can have trouble climbing into litter boxes. A plastic storage tub with sections cut out of it can be used to make a litter box that is very easy to get in and out of.

7) Make the Litter Attractive

- Some cats have developed a preference for a particular type of litter. Most prefer fine grain unscented clumping litter, so try that one first. Any brand is fine. If that does not work, offer a variety of litter types in different litter boxes to see what the cat prefers.
- Cat Attract™ litter is another good choice, but more expensive. Cat Attract™ also makes a litter additive that can be added to cheaper unscented litter. The reason that the Cat Attract™ brands work is that they have a unique herbal scent that attracts the curiosity of cats.
- Regardless of the brand of litter used, do not overfill the litterboxes! Most cats prefer a depth of no more than 1-2 inches of litter. But some cats prefer more and some less. Offer a variety of litter depths in different litter boxes to determine the cat's preference.

8) Suitable Number and Location of Litter Boxes

- As a general rule, there should be one more litter box than the number of cats in the household.
- Do not line litter boxes up in a row! Multiple litter boxes lined up in a row defeats the purpose of having them, which is to spread out resources through the house and minimize the chances of one cat bothering another while he or she is in the litter box.
- At least one litter box should be on every floor of the house. This is especially important with cats who may have urgency issues due to medical conditions.
- Be sure to place litter boxes in quiet, low-traffic locations that have multiple escape routes.
- Food and water bowls should not be too close to the litter box.

9) Make Soiled Areas Unattractive

- This is essential. Otherwise cats will keep going back to pee and/or poop in the same inappropriate locations.
- First remove poop and soak up as much pee as possible by blotting with paper towels.
- Then saturate the soiled areas with an enzymatic cleaner that is labelled to remove urine odors. Nature's Miracle™ and The Equalizer™ are two good brands, but there are other acceptable choices that can be found at pet stores and veterinary clinics.



- Regular household cleaners do not completely eliminate the odor. In which case, the cats can still smell the scent of the pee and poop, even if humans can't. This makes them want to keep soiling in the same areas.
- Follow odor elimination with carpet cleaning. The Bissell® Spot Bot® works well for carpet cleaning in small areas.
- Cover the soiled areas with aluminum foil, double sided sticky tape, or carpet runners with the spikes side facing up.
- Use motion activated spray deterrents such as SSSCAT®, or citrus air freshener sprays. Cats hate the smell of citrus.

10) Pheromones

- Synthetic pheromone analogs mimic a cat's natural facial pheromone and have a calming effect on most cats.
- Brand names are Feliway® and Comfort Zone®. Both come in two different forms: a plug-in diffuser and spray.
- Use them in areas where the cat encounters stress or conflict and/or the house soiling occurs.

Do's and Dont's

- Don't rub your cat's nose in his or pee or poop accidents, and don't punish your cat. Doing this after the fact is useless and potentially dangerous to you and injurious to your cat.
- Do interrupt your cat when caught in the act, but do not scare him or her. Attempt to startle your cat with a loud noise such as rattling pennies in a glass jar.
- Do calmly and quietly take your cat to the litter box after he or she has been interrupted, or at other random times. Praise him or her for peeing and/or pooping in the litter box, and reward with a treat and playtime.
- Do work with a veterinarian and/or behavior specialist for tougher cases. A formal behavior modification plan and anti-anxiety medication may be needed.

Facilitating Successful Adoption

- Facilitating successful adoption begins in the foster home.
- Keep track of your foster cat's stressors and preferences for the adopter.
- Be sure to disclose your cat's history of inappropriate litter box use to the adopter.
- Ensure that the adopter is willing and able to follow recommendations for reducing stress, addressing conflict, and litter box management.



- The shelter or rescue group should provide resources such as educational handouts and the names of local veterinary behavior specialists. They should also be available for follow-up if the adopters have questions or problems after taking their new cat home.

