

Why is my cat 'going' outside the litter box?

Clients often confess a dirty little secret at the end of their cat's wellness exam: "Fluffy's been leaving little 'presents' around the house." They expect a simple answer to this complicated behavior. Since an elimination problem is one of the main reasons U.S. cats are euthanized, this is one issue that shouldn't be an afterthought.

Let's get the terminology straight first. Cats squat to urinate or defecate. Doing so outside the litter box is called *inappropriate elimination*. Different from this is *spraying*—territorial marking—when cats stand and urinate on the wall or furniture. Knowing which your cat is doing can give your veterinarian valuable information. We will stick to inappropriate elimination here.

Know that inappropriate elimination does not happen because your cat is mad at you or because of other human emotional motivations. Rather, there are three common reasons why cats shun the litter pan.

1 Medical issues

Inappropriate elimination can result from pain. Chronic inflammation of the bladder wall, infections, stones, and

tumors can all cause painful bladders, while colon cramps with diarrhea or other abnormal stool can cause inappropriate defecation. (Think how these make you feel.) Your veterinarian will want to do a thorough medical evaluation for any elimination problem.

2 Aversion to the box

Unacceptable litter pan conditions account for many inappropriate urination issues. Your cat may not like what's in the litter pan, where it is, or who's looking at her while she's getting there. So she might choose a cleaner alternative. (Think about going to the bathroom at an airport. I'll bet you choose a clean stall over a dirty one every time.)

Stress may also contribute to inappropriate elimination. Many cats "go" outside the box because they fear other cats in the house. Rather than fighting, they may seek ways to avoid the other cats. (Look at it this way: If you work with someone you don't like, you probably try to avoid them—even by using a different restroom.) Your veterinarian will take a detailed history and help you develop behavior modification strategies to reduce the cat's stress.



BY ELIZA SUNDAHL, DVM, DABVP, owner of KC Cat Clinic, which is located in Kansas City, Mo.

3 A non-pan preference

Inappropriate elimination might become a learned behavior if it goes on long enough or the inciting factor was strong enough. This means a cat that experienced discomfort in the litter pan but not on the bed may continue to choose the bed. While a non-pan preference is usually associated with aversion, very rarely a cat comes into the world with a preference for smooth surfaces or carpet-like textures. Either way, your veterinarian can suggest behavior modification strategies to encourage litter box use.

Get help

The longer inappropriate elimination continues, the harder it is to change. So don't wait months (or until you're ready to get new carpet) before seeking help. Often, simply making the litter box a cleaner, less stressful place gets cats back to using it. But sometimes finding the right strategies can be a challenge—one that involves patience, changes in *your* behavior, and medical expense. Work with your veterinarian to discover any behavior issues and get into the details of your cat's specific case. Together you can develop a plan to eliminate the elimination problems—and keep both you and your cat happy. **HP**

Litter box guidelines

Cats that don't like their litter boxes won't use them. Follow these tips to ensure your cat fancies its pan.

- » Scoop clay litter daily and totally change it at least weekly.
- » Scoop clumping litter daily and change it when you can detect that it is soiled—at least every few weeks.
- » Make sure clumping litter holds when you tap the clumps. If clumps break apart and you can't scoop out the pieces, consider switching litter.
- » Set out one litter box per cat, plus one more in the household.
- » The litter box should be one-and-a-half times the length of the cat.
- » Do not leave on litter box lids—they trap odors and limit escape routes.