



BEHAVIOR  
SERIES

# Introducing Your New Cat to the Litter Box

**M**OST OF US KNOW CATS are finicky eaters, but they can also be pretty picky when it comes to the other end of the digestive process—making use of a litter box. Fortunately, the following suggestions should keep your cat from “thinking outside the box.”

## Location, Location, Location

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. But if the litter box ends up in the basement—next to an appliance or on a cold cement floor—your cat may be less than pleased for a number of reasons.

A kitten or an older cat may not be able to get down a long flight of stairs in time to get to the litter box. If the litter box is located in an area that she seldom frequents, she may not even remember where it is, especially during the first few weeks she's welcomed into your home. If a furnace, washing machine, or dryer suddenly comes on and startles your cat while she's using the litter box, that may be the last time she risks such a frightening experience. And if your cat likes to scratch the surface surrounding her litter box (which some cats do), she may find a cold cement floor unappealing.

So you may have to compromise. The litter box should be kept in a spot that affords your cat some privacy yet is also conveniently located. 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.

## Pick of the Litter

Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained litters, presumably because they have a softer feel. The new scoopable (clumping) litters usually have finer grains than the typical clay litter and are very popular. But high-quality, dust-free, clay litters are relatively small-grained and may be perfectly acceptable to your cat.

If you suspect your cat has spent part of his life outdoors and is likely to eliminate in your houseplants, try mixing some potting soil with your regular litter; pellet-type litters or those made from citrus peels are not recommended. Once you find a litter your cat likes, stick with it. Buying the least expensive litter or the brand that's on sale any given week could result in your cat not using the litter box.

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. 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 eliminate there.

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If you can smell the box, then you can be pretty sure it's offensive to your cat as well.

Add a new box in a different location, and use a different type of litter in the new box. Because your cat has decided that her old litter box is unpleasant, you'll want to make the new one different enough that she doesn't simply apply the old, negative associations to the new box.

Make sure that the litter box isn't near an appliance (such as a furnace) that makes noise, or in an area of the home that your cat doesn't frequent.

If ambushing is a problem, create more than one exit from the litter box, so that if the "ambusher" is waiting by one area, your cat always has an escape route.

If you have multiple cats, provide one litter box for each cat, plus one extra box in a different location.

### Surface Preferences

All animals develop preferences for a particular surface on which they like to eliminate. These preferences may be established early in life, but they may also change overnight for reasons that we don't always understand. Your cat may have a surface preference if:

- ❖ She consistently eliminates on a particular texture—for example, soft-textured surfaces such as carpeting, bedding, or clothing, or slick-textured surfaces such as tile, cement, bathtubs, or sinks.
- ❖ She frequently scratches on this same texture after elimination, even if she eliminates in the litter box.
- ❖ She is or was previously an outdoor cat and prefers to eliminate on grass or soil.

### What You Can Do

If you recently changed the type or brand of your cat's litter, go back to providing the litter that your cat had been using. If your cat is eliminating on soft surfaces, try using a high-quality scoopable litter.

If your cat is eliminating on slick, smooth surfaces, try putting a very thin layer of litter at one end of the box, leaving the other end bare, and put the box on a hard floor.

If your cat has a history of being outdoors, add some soil or sod to the litter box.

To discourage your cat from using a certain area, cover the area with an upside-down carpet runner or aluminum foil, or place citrus-scented cotton balls over the area.

### Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)

- ❖ Removing Pet Stains and Odors
- ❖ Reducing Urine-Marking Behavior in Dogs and Cats

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### Location Preferences

Your cat may have a location preference if:

- ❖ She always eliminates in quiet, protected places, such as under a desk, beneath a staircase, or in a closet.
- ❖ She eliminates in an area where the litter box was previously kept or where there are urine odors.
- ❖ She eliminates on a different level of the home from where the litter box is located.

### What You Can Do

Put at least one litter box on every level of your home. (Remember, a properly cleaned litter box does not smell.)

To make the area where she has been eliminating less appealing to your cat, cover the area with an upside-down carpet runner or aluminum foil, place citrus-scented cotton balls over the area, or place water bowls in the area (because cats often don't like to eliminate near where they eat or drink) or put a litter box in the location where your cat has been eliminating. When she has consistently used this box for at least one month, you may gradually move it to a more convenient location at the rate of an inch—seriously!—per day.

### Everyone Makes Mistakes

If you catch your cat in the act of eliminating outside the litter box, do something to interrupt her like making a startling noise, but be careful not to scare her. Immediately take her to the litter box and set her on the floor nearby. If she wanders over to the litter box, wait and praise her after she eliminates in the box. If she takes off in another direction, she may want privacy, so watch from afar until she goes back to the litter box and eliminates, then praise her when she does.

Don't ever punish your cat for eliminating outside of the litter box. By the time you find the soiled area, it's too late to administer a correction. Do nothing but clean it up. Rubbing your cat's nose in it, taking her to the spot and scolding her, or inflicting any other type of punishment will only make her afraid of you or afraid to eliminate in your presence. Animals don't understand punishment after the fact, even if it's only seconds later, and trying to punish them will often make matters worse.

### Other Types of House Soiling Problems

**Marking/Spraying:** To determine if your cat is marking or spraying, consult a veterinarian or animal behaviorist.

**Fears or Phobias:** When animals become frightened, they may lose control of their bladders or bowels. If your cat is afraid of loud noises, strangers, or other animals, she may soil the home when she is exposed to these stimuli.

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