



Kitty Litter-acy: A Comprehensive Guide to Feline Inappropriate Elimination (IE)

Not using the litter box correctly is the number one behavioral reason for cats being surrendered to shelter. There are many reasons why a cat or kitten might not use the litter box--solving this issue often requires some detective work in order to figure out what works for your individual cat.

So what causes a cat to eliminate outside the box?

Medical conditions. These should *always* be ruled out FIRST by a veterinarian. Indicators might be sudden onset of IE, diarrhea, small puddles of urine on *horizontal* surfaces, straining to eliminate, and seemingly random episodes (not predictable locations). One study of cats exhibiting IE found that *over 60%* had contributing medical causes!

Kittens who are still learning. If your cat is under 3 months old, it's likely they haven't quite gotten the hang of the litter box yet. See our *Kittens Learning Litter Boxes* [handout](#) for more specific tips!

Communication/Marking. It's a fact that both male and female cats can spray. Scent is a crucial part of cat communication, and this can translate into a home environment. Telltale indicators are urination on *vertical* surfaces, repeatedly marking the same spots, and erect vibrating tail posture while urinating. This type of IE is common in cats who have some kind of access (perceived or actual) to the cats in the surrounding neighborhood, and during introductions between cats.

STRESS. This is the reason with flashing lights around it that is *the root cause of the vast majority of inappropriate elimination in cats*. Not all stressed cats will exhibit IE; all cats handle stress differently. For some cats, a new baby might simply take some getting used to, while for others it is an extremely stressful event that triggers an episode of IE.

Common causes for stress IE in cats:

- **Some significant change in a cat's normal routine.** A new roommate, a move, a new baby, a new dog, even a new laundry detergent! Cats are all individuals, and it often takes some careful detective work to determine what might have been a significant stressor for them.
- **Litter box not being cleaned frequently enough.** In outdoor environments, cats rarely eliminate in the same place twice. To ask them to eliminate in an area where there is already poop or urine can take some getting used to. Your average cat box should be scooped *at least once a day*—

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sometimes twice a day for more sensitive cats—and the litter completely changed and the box cleaned regularly.

- **Not enough litter boxes.** It's recommended that a multi cat household have at least $n+1$ litter boxes, where n =number of cats. It's also recommended to have at one litter box per each floor of your living space.
- **Competition from other cats/cats guarding litter boxes** from each other. Some cats will use the litter box as ambush points, which can discourage use by timid cats.
- **Self-soothing behavior.** Urinating is a self-soothing mechanism, which some cats will turn to during stressful moments such as being left alone during a vacation, during a loud party, or other drastic changes to their routine. Often they will choose to do it on or near a familiar smell, something that also makes them feel comforted. *This is where the misconception of "he peed on my clothes because he's mad at me" comes from.* Cats actually lack the conceptual capacity for what humans think of as "spite," which involves a more complex understanding of correlating emotions than cats are capable of.
- **Litter preference.** Many cats are very particular about the scent, texture and even sound (think sizzling baking soda) of their litter, and will choose to eliminate elsewhere if their needs are not met.
- **Box location.** If a fearful cat doesn't feel safe venturing all the way to the laundry room, they may choose to eliminate somewhere else, where they *do* feel secure. A good rule is at least one litter box on each floor.
- **Box size or shape.** Most commercial boxes are *far too small* for the cat in question! Some cats have preferences for covered vs uncovered, and many dislike litter box liners. Large clear plastic storage bins that can be found at many brand name stores make great inexpensive alternatives to the expensive XL litter boxes on the market. Simply cut an opening in one side for your cat to enter/exit. Much less expensive, and often easier to clean!
- **Negative associations with the box.** While it might not seem intuitive to us, if a cat has a negative experience in or around the litter box (such as pain while urinating, being attacked by another cat, or even a loud scary noise) they may associate that negative experience with the *litter box*, rather than the actual trigger. In these cases, try setting up an entirely new type of box in a new location (while making sure the trigger is gone!).

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Situation Specific Tips

Limit access to outdoor cats. Especially if there is any new “access” to the world of outdoor cats. For example, if you recently moved and your cat can suddenly get nose to nose with the stray in the window, or can hear another cat yowling at night, they may be feeling the need to scent mark for that cat’s benefit. This might even include deterrents outside your property, such as citrus spray or motion activated sprinklers to discourage feline prowlers.

Limit access strategically. If a cat is consistently choosing to eliminate on a bed or a couch, you can begin blocking access to those areas, especially when unsupervised, to avoid the cat practicing the unwanted behavior. In chronic cases this might mean restricting a cat to a certain area of the house altogether while you work with a vet and/or a behavior professional to determine the root cause of the behavior.

Try separating multiple cats. In addition to preventing inter-cat litter box competition, this can be a great way to determine exactly *which* cat is eliminating outside the box!

Take punishment out of your repertoire. Since stress is the most common cause of IE, punishment is counter-productive and can often make the behavior worse. Additionally, the cat may begin hiding their eliminations more effectively in order to avoid the punishment. But the biggest reason not to use punishment for IE is—*it doesn’t work!* This is because the reasons for IE aren’t things that can be punished “out.” Cats don’t choose to eliminate out of spite or malice—they are simply reacting to their environment.

Try reinforcing litter box usage! Many people assume you can’t train a cat, but it just ain’t so! Depending on the underlying cause of your cat’s IE, offering them something they love (a delicious treat or some interactive play) right after they use the litter box correctly can strongly increase the likelihood of them using it again! Of course, this method relies on the human being fairly observant in the beginning, and being ready when the kitty decides it’s time to “go.”

Create a plan for stress reduction. *This is one thing we will recommend for ALL IE CASES,* regardless of the cause. Examine your routine for stressors, and attempt to make changes that will help your cat feel more comfortable. For an overview of management and enrichment strategies, check out our *Feline Enrichment handout!* If you don’t know where to start, consider our free helpline where you can get some advice from our certified trainers.

Tips for Troubleshooting

Make one change at a time. Changing multiple variables at the same time might do the trick, but you'll have no way of knowing which one made the difference. This could lead to reoccurrence down the line. And understand that it takes time for cats to transition habits—2 weeks is a general estimate for most cats.

Clean with the right products. Most cleaning products (even those that are marketed specifically to pet owners!) are not *enzymatic*, meaning they do not contain the necessary compounds to completely break down the chemicals in urine. If the smell is not completely eliminated, cats can still perceive it (even if we can't) and are far more likely to habituate using the incorrect spot again. Make sure your cleaner specifically is labeled enzymatic. Our tried and true favorites are Anti Icky Poo and Nature's Miracle.

Track your progress! Keep a log of your cat's preferences, speedbumps and successes. When you find something that works or changes the game, stick with it! When you have a cat exhibiting IE, days can feel like weeks. Tracking your progress helps to keep your journey in perspective. Crucially however, *it can help you identify possible triggers!*

Try to take emotion out of your assessment. Inappropriate elimination can feel *personal*. It can be confusing, disruptive and unpredictable—but understanding the underlying causes can help us take blame out of the equation and instead work on finding successful solutions.

Consider professional assistance. Litter box challenges can be frustrating, and having professional guidance can make a big difference. Make sure whoever you choose uses methods that are based on science, not punishment. Cat behavior expert Pam Johnson Bennett's website <https://catbehaviorassociates.com/> goes into great detail on IE issues, and she has several books on the subject. You can also sign up for a feline private training session through East Bay SPCA!