

How to Litter Train a Cat



Whether you have one, or two, or several plushy, purry cats, sooner or later they stroll out of the room, to you-know-where, for a little privacy. When a new kitty joins the pride, it can follow the elders to learn the proper location for making its business deposits. But what about an only cat, new to the household, a stranger to these rooms?

How to start litter training your cat

You know your cat is royalty and expects you, the staff, to accommodate them in everything. Here are some considerations for your **cat litter box** checklist.

How old is the new cat?

A very young kitten is still learning to control its bladder and bowels and navigate its environment. Getting it used to the box as the place to dig and defecate will take patience and repetition. Keep it (or its siblings) in a confined space with a litter box, until they are used to using it. Sit with the kitten while it eats, talking to it, and then place it in the box after a meal, to set the expectation of visiting the box.

A senior cat's age may affect two things in its adjustment to a new home:

- Stress reaction
- General health

Spraying is a common cat response to the stress of entering a new environment, but an older cat may be experiencing an electrolyte imbalance or early kidney failure. Bring the cat to your vet to make sure.

- Make sure the senior cat can easily reach the litter box. Going up or down stairs could be too difficult.
- Allow the senior cat easier entry into the box. Lowering the sides, making the door larger, or removing the cover will help with this.
- Check to see if the senior cat is comfortable with the amount of litter in the box. Too much or too little can make it hard to poop and cover the scat.
- Place several litter boxes around the house and see where the cat is most comfortable defecating.

Has the cat been using a litter box before now?

Box training a former outdoor cat, a stray, or a feral has specific issues for the cat that must be addressed.

- Change from free-range to confined box: This is a major shift for a creature of firm habits. If your box comes with a cover, leave it off for now. Be sure the box is big enough for the cat to move around. Take time to establish a bond with the cat so that it pays attention to you and the boundaries you create.
- Placement of the box: The placement should be a quiet spot some distance apart from the **cat's food** and water. If you are training a stray to come into the house, place the box in an area where the cat spends time near the house.
- Quality of litter: The litter should feel and smell as natural as possible. It can be sand-like and unscented. Other natural litters are ground corn, walnut pellet, and wood bark pellet. Avoid wood shavings or crystals. Starting out, mix the litter with some soil so it smells and feels like outdoors. Gradually decrease the amount of soil in the litter as your cat becomes accustomed to defecating in the indoor box.
- Make a box visit a habit: Sit with your cat while it eats, talking to it and praising it. When it's done, pick it up and set it in the box. The goal is to create a connection between a box visit and "after dinner."
- Keep the box clean: Daily scooping and fresh litter keep the box a pleasant place to visit—and keeps your house smelling good, too!

What kind of litter was in the previous box?

If you can, find out what litter the cat is accustomed to in its box. If you want to use a different kind, mix the old with the new, gradually increasing the new brand until it is the dominant and then the only kind of litter in the box.

Has the cat been sharing a litter box before now, or has it had its own box?

It will probably be easier to get a new cat used to having a private litter box than to teach a former only cat to share its private space with others. Having multiple litter boxes will address this problem. If you have several cats, keep one more box than cats, as most cats won't use a box that already has waste in it.

How large is the new cat?

The litter box has to be roomy enough for the cat to move around and find a clean spot. If it feels cramped, it may choose to defecate outside the box.

Why do cats poop or pee outside a litter box?

Do not punish the cat! Of course, humans think cats are just getting revenge when they pee or poop outside the litter box. Even so, verbal or physical punishment would only make the problem worse. More likely your cat is responding to a stress that you haven't noticed, or they have a health problem. Launch an investigation into what may be upsetting your cat:

- Visit the vet: A behavior change like this could signal a health problem, like a urinary tract infection (UTI) or kidney failure in a senior cat, or any of a long list of diseases like cancer, diabetes, arthritis, or thyroid problems. Have the vet do urinalysis, stool sample, and a blood draw for a senior cat.
- Different litters in several different boxes: The cat may be uncomfortable with the kind of litter you are using. Set out several boxes around the house with different fillings: newspaper, clumping litter, non-clumping litter, sand, sawdust, carpet remnants, and no litter at all. If your cat shows preference for something unacceptable, like carpet, you'll have to steer the cat back to litter by adding a little litter to the carpet each week. Continue adding more litter until you can remove the carpet remnants from the box.
- Different depths of litter: If you often find litter kicked onto the floor, you are probably using too much. Keep the litter depth to about two inches.
- Clean the box more often: Scoop twice daily and wash the box with soap and water regularly. Do not use a strong disinfectant, as that would drive the cat away.
- Clean the "problem" areas: If your cat is spraying or pooping in the house, clean those spots with an **enzymatic pet cleaner** that breaks down the urine and stool, so the cat cannot remember the location by smell. Regular cleansers don't do this sort of biomatter breakdown.
- Make the "problem" area off-limits: There are a few tricks to tell the cat that the house area where it has been peeing and pooping inappropriately is not allowed for this. You can set the cat's food and water in the area, which clearly states this is not a toilet. You can put down foil on the floor or flip over a carpet runner with spike side up, to make the area unwalkable.
- Confinement: If your cat is defecating in a particular room, close the door to that room. You may have to confine your cat to a closed room with bedding, food, water, toys, and at least one litter box. When you can see the cat is using the box, gradually allow them out to the rest of the house.
- Provide more than one litter box: This is a tactic for homes with more than one floor. Try having a litter box on each floor of the house, so if your cat is having bladder or kidney trouble, there's never a long trot to the box.

In any event, face the situation as a matter of the cat being stressed out by something you haven't identified yet, rather than a personal vendetta.

Why do cats eat their litter?

There can be a number of reasons behind your cat's surprising tendency to eat the litter in their box. For one thing, they might simply be bored. Do you play with your cat for at least twenty minutes at a time? Do they have **cat toys and teasers**? Maybe a Roomba to ride around the house?

A young kitten, on the other hand, can be a lot like a human toddler in this respect. They're curious! What is this stuff? And the way to find out is to put it in their mouth. Sometimes kittens will chew on the charcoal filter in the lid of a covered cat box, which could be toxic to them. That behavior is probably just curiosity, since a charcoal filter doesn't contain any minerals important to a cat's health.

Mature cats who nibble litter, however, could be doing so for health reasons. The behavior is called pica, and it could indicate a health problem that needs to be brought to a vet's attention as soon as possible.

- **Anemia:** Anemia is a deficiency in the cat's red blood cell count, and the pica behavior comes from the cat trying to get more minerals. Anemia can be caused by infection, toxins, diabetes, bone marrow disorders, chronic disease, or major nutritional disorders. Check your cat's gums. If they are pale, white, or bluish, this is a strong indicator of anemia.
- **Leukemia or kidney disease:** These can also be indicated by pica behavior, so it's important to have your vet run blood and urine tests on your cat.
- **Nutritional deficiency:** Most cat litters contain minerals, especially if they are made from clay. If a cat's diet lacks vitamins and minerals like vitamin A, magnesium, taurine, etc., they may start chewing clay-based kitty litter. Do you make your own cat food? This might be part of the problem's source.

If health issues are ruled out, try increasing stimulation and play for the cat, giving it your full attention for about twenty minutes at a time. If you see the cat nibbling litter, pick it up and start a playing session. Changing from clay litter to wheat or pellets could also change the behavior.

Tips for litter training your cats

Here is a short list of pet-owner strategies for training your cat to the litter box, keeping them happy, and understanding what they might be trying to tell you with out-of-the-box behavior.

- Make sure the box is big enough.
- Use two to three inches of litter.
- Scoop the box daily.
- For a household of several cats, use that an equivalent number of litter boxes plus one more.
- Leave the cover off of the box while getting the cat used to it.
- Mix outdoor soil with kitty litter to get a former outdoor cat used to using the box indoors.
- Wash the box with soap and water regularly.
- Scoop out the box daily.
- An older cat will need a box with lower sides.
- For a house with several floors, put a litter box on each floor.
- Add baking soda to the litter to control odors.
- Peeing and pooping outside the box could mean the cat is stressed about something.
- Peeing outside the box could be a UTI or kidney problem—ask the vet.
- Never punish a cat for peeing or pooping outside the box—instead, find out what's troubling it.
- If the cat pees somewhere in the house, put its food and water there to say that this area is off limits to peeing.
- If there's a lot of litter kicked out of the box, you're using too much litter.
- A mat to catch kicked litter will help keep the box area neat.
- If the cat eats the litter, it could mean your cat needs to go to the vet.
- Your cat could be bored and wants to play more.
- Your cat may need more minerals and vitamins in its diet.
- Place the box away from the cat's food and water, in a quiet place.
- A cover on the box can make it feel more private for the cat.
- Clean the box! Daily!

It's an old saying that you don't train your pets, your pets train you. Making pet care your own regimen of consistent, thorough, and diligent habits will prove to your cat that you are a reliable and trustworthy caregiver. Start with the litter box, and you'll earn all of the purrs.

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