

Take steps when cat ignores the litter box

Why would a cat that used her litter box faithfully for seven years all of a sudden start pooping outside of the box? Several readers submitted questions about



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similar scenarios, so hopefully I can provide some answers.

There is no simple remedy, but don't lose hope. About a year ago I

addressed litter box hygiene and maintenance in this column, and ultimately this is the key to almost every nonmedical elimination problem.

Any cat that is eliminating more than a couple of times out of the box should be checked for medical problems by her veterinarian. Anxiety, arthritis, back problems, gastrointestinal diseases, and anal gland problems are all possible medical reasons why a cat would start eliminating out of her box.

Behaviors become routine for cats, so don't let an elimination problem continue without addressing it. The longer it goes on, the harder it becomes to change the behavior.

Comfort, cleanliness and safety are the keys to getting a cat back into her box. Almost every cat that stops using her box, especially for defecation, has had a bad experience associated with the box and with the process of passing stool.

Unpleasant episodes with diarrhea or constipa-

tion often cause a cat to stop using the box. The cat associates pain and discomfort of abnormal bowel movements with the litter box and therefore chooses to avoid the box. A new box that looks and smells differently – and is placed in a different location – often solves this situation.

As they get older, cats often become much pickier about the cleanliness of their litter box.

- If a cat is not using her box, that box must be scooped a minimum of twice daily.
- There should at least be

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as many boxes as there are cats in the home (most behaviorists think one per cat plus one extra is ideal).

- If your cat is passing up a clean box to defecate elsewhere, then you definitely need to get another box and consider using a different type of litter. Many cats develop substrate preferences and prefer different materials from what you have opted to put in the box.
- Be sure the box is large enough to accommodate whatever positioning your cat needs to defecate. Cats prefer boxes 1.5 times the length of their bodies.
- Owners often like to put boxes in tucked away places that may not be comfortable for the cat to position herself inside. A cat may

not feel safe because she feels like there's no easy escape if something startles her.

- Having easy access and being able to get out of the box and avoid other people and animals in the home is crucial for many cats.
- Some cats don't like using hooded boxes, so if there is a cover, remove it.

If carpet has become the preferred site for your cat to defecate, consider this retraining idea:

- Get a second litter box and get some carpet remnants that you can either clean or throw away, and put these in the box.
- If the cat starts using the box, slowly start adding litter on top of the carpet.
- Over several weeks you can progressively add more litter and take the carpet out of the box.

If there are room preferences, try to figure out why that room is a better spot for the box. This could give important clues to changing the cat's behavior. Limit your cat's access to rooms she prefers to defecate in by closing doors and using baby gates.

Getting a cat back in her box can be very challenging, and it requires an owner who is willing to make changes and work to solve the problem. In some situations, medication may be needed to help in the retraining process.

If you are not making progress, seek help from an experienced behaviorist or veterinarian.

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