

## Ensuring Good Litter Box Habits for your Cats

Reliable use of the litter box is absolutely essential behavior for a house cat. Fortunately, it is easy to achieve, since no training is required, and you merely manage your cat's environment to take advantage of the species' natural elimination habits. By following these simple rules, you can make 99.9% sure your cat will be completely civilized in this respect!

- **Spay or neuter your cat before the onset of puberty.** This will virtually eliminate the hormone-driven urge to "mark" his territory by spraying urine against vertical surfaces. If you get your cat after the age of 6 months, have him/her altered immediately. If the cat has begun to spray, expect it to take 6 weeks for the hormone levels to drop.
- **Don't declaw your cat!** A reluctance to use the litter box correlates strongly with declawing, for reasons not yet fully understood. It seems likely that the pain in the paws after surgery is aggravated by the act of covering urine and feces in the box, and the box is abandoned in favor of a more comforting surface, such as carpet, laundry basket, or the bathtub. Although the failure to use the box may not be constant, it may persist throughout the cat's life whenever any discomfort or stress is experienced.
- **Keep the litter box clean!** The most common reason for failure to use the box is poor housekeeping by the human! At a minimum, the box should be scooped every day. If you use scoopable litter, it should be emptied and washed with soap and water every 2-3 months. If using clay, paper, or pine litter, washing once a week is essential.
- **Select the litter and the box from the cat's point of view.** Cats usually prefer the scoopable litter (looks and feels like fine sand) that is NOT scented. Ideal depth is 1" -2," though individual preferences may vary. If you have a kitten, or an elderly, arthritic cat, make sure the sides are not too high. Some cats do not like covered boxes. Old cats and very large cats may need an extra-large box.
- **Have enough litterboxes!** In a multi-cat household, the rule is one box per cat, plus one box. There's nothing more frustrating than finding the bathroom occupied when you really need it, and cats feel the same way. Bad habits can start from just such an emergency.
- **Locate the box, or boxes, with accessibility and privacy in mind.** If you put the box in the basement, you have to be sure the door is never left closed. This is one drawback of using a bathroom for the box! The ideal location, to a cat, is not too far from his favorite resting place, not too close to his food or water, and in a relatively quiet, low traffic part of the house. If your home has multiple levels, it may be a good idea to have a box on each one. It is best to keep all litter boxes away from washing machines or other areas that may have loud, random noises that can frighten your cat and cause them to avoid that location.
- **Always check for medical problems FIRST!** Whenever a normally well-civilized cat fails to use the litter box, the first step should always be an exam by the vet. Diarrhea is obviously a sign of being unwell, but urinary tract infections may have no other symptoms than frequent urination and sometimes failing to use the box.
- **Always eliminate all traces of house soiling accidents.** Even if your cat did it because she was sick, she could return to the site if you don't remove the odor completely. Use an enzyme cleaner, such as Nature's Miracle. If you aren't sure you've found all spots (a cat with a bladder infection may only produce a few drops), borrow a black light to find them.