BEHAVIOR SERIES

Introducing Your New Cat to the Litter Box

MOST 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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What's the Magic Number?

You should have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats. That way, none of them will ever be prevented from eliminating in the litter box because it's already occupied. You might also consider placing litter boxes in several locations around the house, so that no one cat can prevent the other cats from getting access. We also recommend that you place at least one litter box on each level of your house.

It's not possible to designate a personal litter box for each cat in your household, as cats may use any litter box that's available, and that means a cat may occasionally refuse to use a litter box after another cat has used it. In this case, all of the litter boxes will need to be kept extremely clean and additional boxes may be needed.

An Undercover Operation? Potential Problems of Covered Litter Boxes

Some people prefer to provide their cats with a covered litter box, but doing so may introduce some problems.

You may forget to clean the litter box as frequently as you should because the dirty litter is "out of sight, out of mind." A covered litter box traps odors inside, so it will need to be cleaned more often than an open one. A dirty, covered litter box is to your cat what a portapotty is to you!

A covered litter box may not allow a large cat sufficient room to turn around, scratch, dig, or position herself in the way she wants.

A covered litter box may make it easier for another cat to lay in wait and ambush the user as she exits the box; on the other hand, a covered litter box may feel more private, and timid cats may prefer it.

To discover which type of litter box your cat prefers, you may want to experiment by offering both types at first.

Keeping It Clean

To meet the needs of the most discriminating cat, feces should be scooped out of the litter box daily. How often you actually change (replace) the litter depends on the number of cats you have, the number of litter boxes, and the type of litter you use. Twice a week is a general guideline for clay litter, but depending on the circumstances, you may need to replace it every other day or only once a week. If you clean the litter box daily, scoopable litter may only need to be changed every two to three weeks. If you notice an odor or if much of the litter is wet or clumped, it's time for a change. Don't use strong smelling chemicals or cleaning products when washing the litter box, as doing so may cause your cat to avoid the box. Some cleaning products are toxic to cats. Washing with soap and water should be sufficient.

Liner Notes

Some cats don't mind having a plastic liner in the litter box, while others do. Again, you may want to experiment to see if your cat is bothered by a liner in the box. If you do use a liner, make sure it's anchored in place, so it can't easily catch your cat's claws or be pulled out of place.

Depth of Litter

Some people think that the more litter they put in the box, the less often they will have to clean it, but that's a mistake. Most cats won't use litter that's more than about two inches deep. In fact, some long-haired cats actually prefer less litter and a smooth, slick surface, such as the bottom of the litter box. The fact is the litter box needs to be cleaned on a regular basis, and adding extra litter is not a way around that chore.

"Litter-Training" Cats

There's really no such thing as "litter-training" a cat in the same way one would housetrain a dog. A cat doesn't need to be taught what to do with a litter box because instinct will generally take over. The only thing you need to do is provide an acceptable, accessible litter box, using the suggestions above. It's not necessary to take your cat to the litter box and move her paws back and forth in the litter; in fact, we don't recommend it, as such an unpleasant experience is likely to initiate a negative association with the litter box.

If Problems Develop

If your cat begins to eliminate in areas other than the litter box, your first call should always be to your veterinarian. Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cat's litter box habits. If your veterinarian determines that your cat is healthy, the cause may be a simple behavior problem that can be resolved by using behavior modification techniques. Punishment is not the answer, nor is banishing your cat outdoors. For long-standing or complex situations, contact an animal-behavior specialist who has experience working with cats.

Related topics at *www.petsforlife.org*

- Solving Litter Box Problems

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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