

Establishing Good Litter Box Habits

Based on articles from the San Francisco SPCA

Location

The best location for litter boxes is a quiet, private place where the cat will not be disturbed by people or other pets. Noisy areas near washing machines, furnaces or under stairs may frighten the cat away from the box. Never place the litter box close to food and water dishes. If you live in a multi-story house, it is best to have a box on each level.



Cleaning the box

Litter boxes must be kept consistently clean by scooping daily. The single most common reason for a cat's refusal to use a litter box is because the box is dirty—no one likes a dirty bathroom. Clumping litter should be scooped daily, and the litter boxes washed weekly. Non-clumping litter should be scooped daily and the box emptied and washed every other day.

Type of litter

Most cats prefer fine-grained litters, presumably because they have a softer feel. The new clumping litters are usually finer grained than the typical clay litter. Pellet-type litters, scented litters, or those made from citrus peels are not recommended. Once you find a litter your cat likes, don't change types or brands. Non-clumping litters are safest for kittens under 4 months.

Depth of litter

Cats like to have sufficient litter to scrape and cover their waste, but they do not necessarily want to sink into several inches of litter. Most domestic cats don't like litter more than about 2 inches deep. In fact, some cats, particularly some long-haired cats, may actually prefer less litter and a smooth, slick surface such as the bottom of the box.

Number of boxes

A good guideline is to have at least as many boxes as you have cats. Some cats prefer to urinate in one box and defecate in another and some will refuse to use a box that another cat has already soiled. Many cats dislike covered boxes because they make it difficult to maneuver inside and easier for rival cats to ambush the user as he exits. Larger cats will need a larger box.



Kittens

Kittens have an innate predisposition to use loose material as their litter, but they may also choose other locations. Limit the kitten's territory until they learn that the litter box is the only acceptable place for elimination. Just as with small children, they should not be expected to have to travel very far to find their toilet areas. Praise and rewards will help to speed the process.

If problems develop

If your cat stops using the litter box your first call should always be to your veterinarian. Many medical conditions can cause a change in litter box habits and these possibilities must be considered first. If your veterinarian determines your cat is healthy, the cause may be behavioral. Most litter box behavior problems can be resolved using behavior modification techniques. Punishment is NOT the answer. Have an enzymatic cleaner handy to help eliminate the odor. For more assistance, contact an animal behavior professional who is knowledgeable about and experienced in working with cats.