

Resolving Cat Litterbox Problems
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As with any behavior problem, the reason why the cat is not using her box must be determined before attempting to resolve the problem. Medical causes should always be ruled out first. Trying things at random, or because they worked for someone else may actually make the problem worse unless we understand the reason for the behavior. This is determined by obtaining a behavioral history and by observations of the cat and her environment.

The most common reasons we see for litterbox problems are changes in the cat's surface and location preferences for elimination. In these cases, cats often do not cover their waste, they may "hang off" the edge of the box and be reluctant to step inside, or they may go right next to the box. If the cat is eliminating on soft surfaces such as carpet and furniture, try changing to a clumping litter which has a softer feel than clay litter. If the cat is using slick, smooth surfaces such as sinks and tile floors, try barely covering the bottom of the box with litter. In general the litter should not be very deep - not more than 1-2 inches.

The litterbox may have become unacceptable because it is not kept clean. Feces should be scooped out daily, as should clumps of litter if you are using a clumping litter. The litter should be changed often enough so that the litter looks mostly dry and there is no noticeable odor. The frequency will vary with the number of boxes and the number of cats in the house but should be at least once a week.

Cats may also develop litterbox aversions because they associate "bad things" with the box. Perhaps they have been "ambushed" there by another cat. Try adding a box and making sure there is more than one escape route in and from each box. There should be at least as many boxes as there are cats, and in general its best to have them in different locations so one cat can't guard all the litterboxes. Large cats may not like a covered box because it is difficult for them to find a comfortable position if they are restricted by the cover. Try taking the cover off. If the box is located in a high traffic area or next to household appliances such as a washer, dryer or furnace that make startling noises, the cat may have been frightened while in the box and will then refuse to use it. Move the box to a more private area. Most cats are repelled by the smell of strong room deodorizers. Do not place any of these near the litterbox. If the boxes are kept clean, odor should not be a problem.

Soiled areas can be made less attractive by covering them with a vinyl carpet runner, pointy-side up, or with strips of double-sided sticky tape. Commercial products such as Scat Mats and Snappy Trainers are also effective. This approach alone will not resolve the problem unless the litterbox is made more attractive - otherwise the cat will go right next to the "booby-traps". Some problems require assistance from a certified behaviorist to resolve.