



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

# Litterbox Training & Spraying

## Cause

The most common reason a cat stops using her litterbox is because the box is dirty -- from her point of view, not yours. Social changes such as a new cat in the neighborhood or children home from vacation may also be the cause. Cats often react to any type of stress by eliminating outside the litterbox. Any sudden change in elimination habits should be discussed with your veterinarian.

## Treatment

### Prevention

Until fully housetrained, your cat should not be allowed full run of your house. Each time she makes a mistake, the behavior is further established as a habit. Punishing teaches the cat to be afraid of you. Scolding and then taking her to her litterbox after she has already eliminated teaches her to associate the litterbox with punishment. Basically, punishment doesn't work with cats. Prevention and praise for "getting it right" are the keys to training.

When you leave the house for any length of time, confine your cat to one room, such as the kitchen, bathroom, utility room or garage. Provide a bowl of water and a warm place to sleep at one end of the room and a freshly cleaned litterbox at the other end. Until house soiling has been cured, the cat should have a regular feeding schedule, so she will develop a corresponding elimination schedule. Confinement may alleviate the problem, but it is not a solution -- simply a way to confine the problem to a small, protected area while you are retraining the cat so that she can have free run of your home.

## Keeping the Box Clean

Think about "clean" from the cat's viewpoint. When she soils your dining room carpet, the area is immediately and thoroughly cleaned. Given the choice between a regularly cleaned place and a litterbox that gets changed once or twice a week, your fastidious cat will naturally prefer the carpet.

The litterbox must be cleaned daily. Discard the old litter. Rinse the box thoroughly with warm water and vinegar or lemon juice. Add about 1½ inches of fresh litter, preferably the unscented kind.

Make sure the litterbox is in an appropriate place. Cats do not like to soil near their sleeping or eating areas, so locate the box away from these. The box should be in an accessible but quiet place. If the cat is new to the house, she may hide for a few days and may not be too keen on investigating the rest of the house, so place the box fairly close to her hiding place. Some additional factor, known only to her, may be keeping your cat from using the litterbox, so put another one down in a different location. If there are multiple cats in the house, have several litterboxes.

## Rewards

In order to reward the cat for using her box, you must be there when she needs to eliminate. You can predict when your cat will use her box. Most cats (especially kittens) will eliminate immediately after waking. In addition, they will usually defecate and sometimes urinate within a half hour after eating and exercising. If the cat's edible input is provided on a regular schedule, the output will follow likewise. Before feeding her, spend 10-15 minutes playing with her. Then feed her, allowing 15 minutes to eat. Remove any leftover. Have another gentle play



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session after her meal.

Part of playtime can consist of calling her to her litterbox from a variety of places around the house, particularly areas where she has soiled before. When she gets to the box, scratch the litter to get her interest. Similarly, throughout the day, whenever the cat has been asleep for more than two hours (one hour for kittens), wake her and call her to her litterbox. Encourage her to hop into the box and praise her when she does. Even if she does not eliminate, she is learning the box is a great *clean* place to be. This is especially important for cats who are now avoiding the litterbox because they assume it is always dirty or because they associate it with punishment. If she eliminates, praise her in a gentle voice. Once she has finished, gently stroke her and take the time to tell her how pleased you are.

### ***Punishment: Don't Waste Your Breath***

Never physically reprimand your cat, even if you catch her in the act of misbehaving. Cats react extremely badly to physical abuse. Either they run away and hide and will not emerge for several days (which means they'll eliminate in their hiding place), or they run and eliminate on your bed or clothing. If your cat has soiled outside her litterbox, you have allowed her free run of the house too soon. Clean up the mess and go back to step one.

### **Spraying**

Spraying, or urine marking, occurs in male *and* female cats. A cat may be perfectly litterbox-trained

but still spray urine, because this behavior is not just a physiological function of eliminating waste. Urine marking is a sexual, territorial, or social behavior.

Spraying often starts if there are too many cats in the house, if a neighborhood cat is roaming the area, or if a new cat or person visits. It is a common reaction to stress and can be triggered by even the smallest of changes in the cat's environment or routine. Any threat to her territory can make a cat feel insecure and cause her to spray. Punishment should not be used, as it will only add more stress to the cat's life and make the problem worse. Treatment is directed toward helping your cat feel more secure, relaxed, and content.

Confinement to a quiet room is a wonderful security blanket for stressed cats. Spend time there with her if she wants company. Provide plenty of toys, scratching posts, logs, etc. This is not punishment or prison: this is her quiet retreat area from whatever is frightening or unnerving her.

Altering -- spaying or neutering your cat -- is essential to solving this problem. If your cat is already altered, ask your veterinarian about alternative treatments, their dosage, potential side effects, etc. Hormones are often effective in stopping territorial behavior such as spraying, fighting, aggressiveness, roaming, etc. They sometimes require several weeks to take effect. Confine kitty to a small, protected area during this time. It is not necessary to use hormones for long periods of time. Sometimes they can be used just long enough for the stressful situation to abate.

**For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.**