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Your Cat and Litterbox Chat: The Prevention of Litterbox Problems

What every cat owner should know about the prevention of litterbox problems:

- ✓ Be sure your cat and all pets are spayed or neutered. Sexually mature, intact cats frequently use urine and feces to mark their territory. This behavior is hormonally driven. Most spraying disorders are caused by stress and anxiety. The cat feels threatened in some way and feels it must defend its territory by exhibiting marking behaviors. Most marking disorders can be modified and managed successfully (refer to handout on marking behaviors).
- ✓ How many litterboxes depends on how many cats are in your household. The general rule is one box for every cat plus one, so in a two-cat household there should be at least three litterboxes. Some cats prefer to defecate in one box and urinate in another. Some cats will not use a box that has been soiled by another cat. Give them many options for success versus setting them up to fail.
- ✓ Location preference: Place litterboxes in a quiet, private place that is easily accessible to your cat. You do not want them to be disturbed by children or ambushed by other pets in the home. Avoid noisy locations such as near the washing machine, furnace, or under-stairs. These locations may scare your cat away from the litterbox. Do not place all the litterboxes in the same area. If you have multiple floors in your home, a box must be placed on all floors. It is not possible to designate a personal litterbox for each cat in your household, as cats will use any litterbox that is available.
- ✓ Avoid placing the litterbox near food and water bowls. You would not want to eat where you eliminate and either does your cat. There should be at least a 10-15 foot barrier between the litterbox and food/water bowls.
- ✓ Type of Litter or Texture of litter is very important for your cat. At an early age, as kittens approximately 30-36 days of age, cats develop a substrate (texture) preference. You must choose a litter that appeals to your cat. Research has shown that cats prefer a fine granular or sand like texture. High quality scooping litters meet these criteria. Other textures that can be considered include a high quality, dust free, unscented clay litters. If you believe your cat spent some time outside you may choose to mix some potting soil, which is not very absorbent, in with your regular litter to encourage your kitty to use the box. Pellet type litters or those made of citrus peels are not recommended. A brand that is recommended is called *Cat Attract*. This litter has an herbal drawing agent in it designed to draw cats to the litterbox. It has been successful with training kittens to use a litterbox and/or assist a cat that has developed litterbox aversion back to using their litterbox.
- ✓ Once you find a litter your cat likes DO NOT change types or brands. Frequently changing the brand or texture of litter can result in litterbox avoidance. Also do not use scented litters; the perfume or chemical scent can repel your cat away from the litterbox. Avoid cheap, inexpensive litters. These litters are generally lower quality and have added chemicals that create a lot of dust which could make it difficult for your cat to breathe while trying to eliminate. Do not place a room deodorizer or air freshener near the litterbox; again



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the perfume scent can repel your cat away from the box. If you feel the need a thin layer of plain baking soda placed on the bottom of the litterbox will help absorb odors without repelling your cat. But if you are using a high quality litter, the baking soda should not be necessary. If you find litterbox odor offensive, your cat finds it even more offensive and will not want to eliminate there.

- ✓ Cleaning the litterbox: The number one reason for litterbox aversion is a dirty litterbox. You must scoop all boxes once or twice a day. This will vary depending on the number of cats living in your house compared to the number of litterboxes. The entire box should be dumped weekly and washed out with hot water and a gently dish soap. Do not use harsh chemicals that could leave a scent behind that would offend your cat.
- ✓ Avoid using plastic litterbox liners. This comes back to the substrate preference mentioned above. Some cats find the texture of the plastic irritating and it will cause them to stop using their box. Also be sure your cat has access to covered (hooded boxes) as well as uncovered boxes. Cats need to feel safe inside their litterbox. A covered box prevents the cat from escaping should they feel threatened while eliminating. Covered boxes also trap the odors inside creating an “outhouse effect”.
- ✓ For an adult cat the litterbox should be 22” x 16” minimum. Each litterbox should have 4-6 inches of litter so your cat(s) can adequately scratch around and cover once they have eliminated.
- ✓ Once you have established a location for the boxes do not move them. This will cause your cat to become confused and possibly try and use the old location to eliminate. Do not confuse your cat.
- ✓ When introducing a new cat into your home: Place your new family member in room with access to her food, water, bed, and of course litterbox. Once your cat has used the litterbox several times consistently, you can consider a proper introduction into the rest of the house (refer to handouts discussing Introducing Your New Pet to Your Household /Other Pets).
- ✓ When introducing a kitten into your home: Kittens develop a substrate (texture) preference at a very young age, 30-36 days old. It is important that you help them be successful with litterbox training. Confine them in a kitten-proofed room with access to their food, water, bed, toys and litterbox. Make sure the sides of the litterbox are short and the kitten can easily gain access to litterbox. For very small kittens a litterbox may need to be modified by using a small tray or pan until the kitten is big enough to access a real litterbox. Do not expect your kitten to travel far distances to use the litterbox. They need to have easy access to their toilet area. Again ***Cat Attract*** litter can help train your kitten to use their litterbox.
- ✓ Use positive reinforcement when your cat or kitten uses their litterbox. This will help them to learn that using their litterbox earns treats, play, and love.
- ✓ If a problem develops: If your cat begins to eliminate in areas other than the litterbox, you should first call your veterinarian. Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cat’s litterbox habits. If your veterinarian determines your cat is healthy, the cause may be behavioral. Most litterbox behavior problems can be resolved by using behavior modification techniques. **Punishment is not the answer!!!** Consult with your veterinarian and/or Purrfect Paws Animal Behavior Center, LLC.



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"I Have More Questions"

- ✓ If you have additional questions about this subject, please contact Purrfect Paws Animal Behavior Center, LLC at 716-465-6555.