

# Gotta Go! The Top Ten Reasons Your Cat Won't Use the Litter Box

## 1. Medical Problems

The most common reason a cat stops using the litter box is a simple urinary tract infection. If a cat that has never had trouble using the litter box before suddenly starts urinating outside of her box frequently, the first thing you should do is take her to the vet. Usually a urinary tract infection is also accompanied by unusually frequent urination, pain while urinating, or dark, bloody, or strong-smelling urine, but this is not always the case; it's best not to wait for other symptoms to develop, since a week of antibiotics could clear everything right up.

## 2. Diabetes

Cats can get diabetes, just like people can. And in this case, the problem is that she may just not be able to "hold it" long enough to make it to the litter box. The onset is usually gradual, over the course of a couple of weeks, and can go unnoticed, but keep an eye on your cat's behavior: is she drinking excessively and urinating unusually frequently? Has her appetite changed dramatically? Is she having vision problems, or seeming unsteady on her legs? If so, seek medical attention for her as soon as you can; while diabetes is an easily-treatable disease and need not subtract at all from her life span, it can cause permanent vision problems if left unattended for too long.

## 3. Dirty Box

Cats, like people, can be very fastidious. Some may not mind a box that isn't always pristine, but many do. Try putting yourself in their place: would you want to use a toilet that hadn't been flushed for days? And you don't even have to stand in yours! If you have trouble keeping the box clean enough to suit your cat, consider providing her with more than one. That way, when one is dirty and you're not there to scoop it, she has an option other than your furniture or potted plants. It is also a good idea to clean the box itself on a regular basis; a cat's sense of smell is much more fine-tuned than yours, and she may be offended by a build-up of urine and feces odor on the box itself, rather than just soiled litter. But be careful

with chemicals: you don't want to use anything harsh or toxic to clean the litter box, because your cat will be coming into contact with it. A little soap and water should do the trick.

## 4. Different Litter

Think back: have you changed your cat's litter recently? If you have, that could easily be the reason she won't use her litter box. Cats are creatures of habit; your cat is used to the texture, smell, and look of her litter, and if you change it abruptly, she may not recognize it as something she's supposed to do her business on. Cats can also be repulsed by scented litters - while they may smell nice to you, your cat may beg to differ. If you do change your cat's litter, be sure to do it very gradually so she can adjust to the change slowly...it might just save you some carpet and furniture damage.

## 5. Bad Location

There are a few rules to remember when placing your litter box. One is that a cat does not like to use the bathroom near where she eats; the other is that the litter box should never be in a location where the cat may get startled or frightened. If either of these things sound familiar, try moving the litter box - things may improve! Find a place with some degree of privacy, in an area that your cat frequents, which has a non-concrete floor, and is away from appliances and other objects that might make noise and scare your cat. If the cat develops a lasting idea that the litter box is a scary place, your troubles will become much more difficult to fix.

## 6. Marking Territory

Is your cat fixed? Like all animals (yes, people too), cats are territorial and have their ways of sketching out boundaries. It's not really a refusal to use the litter box in this case, since the urine is used to leave a scent mark rather than because the cat needs to go...but it sure is a hassle. If your cat is not fixed, *get it fixed!* This may well be all it takes to solve the problem, and on top of that, it will prolong your cat's

life and go a long way toward preventing development of cancer down the road. While male cats are more likely to mark territory, female cats may do it as well, especially in a multiple-cat home where there is competition for territory.

## **7. Stress**

If you've ever been stressed out (and everybody has), you know that it can make you do things that you wouldn't, otherwise. Cats are just the same, but they can't tell you what's causing them stress. Think about what's been going on in your life. Have you moved? Added a new pet or child to the family? Gone on a vacation? Any of these things can lead to stress-related behavior problems for cats. Try to keep things as comfortable and stable as you can...your cat just needs to relax into her new situation.

## **8. Moved Box**

Sometimes, it's as simple as a little confusion. If the litter box isn't where your cat expects it to be, she may become confused and – how to put it – improvise a little when she needs to go. If you move the box, be sure to show your cat where it is a few times to make sure she catches on. If she never seems to get the picture, you may have moved the box to a location that she doesn't like...see number 5 above!

## **9. Multiple Cats**

Having a multi-cat household can be wonderful, but it can also cause problems when it comes to the litter box. There are a few reasons for this. One is an issue of cleanliness: as the number of cats

increases, the litter box gets dirty that much faster, and as mentioned before, some cats will not use a dirty box. Another issue is crowding. Ideally, a multi-cat home should have at least as many litter boxes as there are cats...if there's a line for the bathroom, your cat is more likely to just find another surface to use than to wait her turn. Plus, some cats just never learned to share, and won't use a box that has been used by other cats. Finally, territoriality becomes an issue in homes with multiple cats. For more info, see number 6 above!

## **10. Declawing**

Here's one that surprises most people, but it's true: declawed cats are much more likely to stop using the litter box than cats that have kept their claws, and it is frequently not just a matter of urination. The reason is that when a cat returns home after being declawed, it is in an incredible amount of pain – don't let anyone tell you otherwise. When a declawed cat uses the litter box following surgery, she can't ignore her instinct to scratch and bury; the pain it causes her can make her fear the litter box for the rest of her life. What she will do instead is seek out soft surfaces – furniture, pillows, beds, blankets – that cause her less pain, and adopt them as her bathroom. Sadly, many cats who would otherwise never have developed these problems had they not been declawed find themselves left in shelters because of them. If you are considering declawing your cat, or just want more information, please read the information provided in this packet on the subject, entitled "The Facts about Declawing: What Every Cat Owner Should Know."