

Cats are clean by nature

Cats are by nature, very fastidious about their toilet habits and will normally be happy to use a litter tray indoors, or to soil in carefully chosen spots in the garden. If your cat regularly toilets or sprays indoors, it is certainly cause for concern. The occasional one-off accident may happen if a cat is unwell or is suddenly frightened or stressed by a particular event, but if toileting around the home persists, the cause should be investigated, both for the health and welfare of the cat, and also for your own convenience.

The 3 Main Causes of Inappropriate Toileting:

1. Health related
2. Litter tray related
3. Anxiety/stress related

Punishment won't work!

The first thing to state, is that any form of punishment is not the answer, and will not work. Scolding, shouting, smacking etc. will only make the cat fearful and stressed, and will quite likely make the problem worse. It's worth noting that the cat is not toileting/spraying in undesirable places deliberately to annoy you - something has gone wrong in it's environment or with it's health, and your task now is to discover what it is!



You will first need to establish and eliminate the cause, then you can help the cat to start using the litter tray again. As each cat is unique they might react to problems differently, so the following are general rules which will not always apply to all cats.

Cause 1 - Health Related

Health check by a vet

One of the main causes for many litter tray avoidance problems is due to physical conditions such as Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease (FLUTD) or Cystitis, therefore it is advisable to have the cat checked over by a vet first. Cystitis can cause a cat to urinate in small quantities frequently, and a urinary tract infection can cause irritation and may make the cat favour standing up to urinate, and either condition can cause the cat to urinate outside the litter tray.

Cats who suffer repeated bouts of cystitis may benefit from an increased fluid intake or even to change from a dry diet to a wet one, however please consult your vet before changing your cat's diet. For Urinary Infections along with the medication that your vet has suggested the common human remedy of cranberry, orange, and other citrus juices also can help the cats by boosting the acidity of the urine and decreasing the amount of bacteria. A chewable vitamin C tablet a day will reduce the acidity to prevent further infections (always check with your vet first).

Cause 2 - Litter Tray Related

Solving litter tray and spray problems is possible but it requires a lot of patience, persistence, a systematic plan for retraining and time. Of course these are general rules which not always apply to all cats and in some cases professional help might be required.

New cat in the household

If the cat is new to your home and you have allowed him the run of the house straight away, he may be toileting in unacceptable places purely because he has not learned where the acceptable place is! In this case, you should take him back to basics, and confine him to one room with his litter tray, bed, food and water, until the cat has used the litter tray several times (whilst in this room, the litter tray should be sited as far away from his food as possible, and you should interact with your cat often so that he doesn't feel isolated or 'punished'). Once you have decided where to put the litter-trays in the house, keep them there and don't move them around.

Kittens

Kittens left to their own devices may decide they prefer other, more convenient locations instead of their litter tray, so you need to limit their 'exploration areas' until they learn that the litter tray is the only acceptable place to toilet. A good idea is to confine them to one room (as described in 'New Cat' above), so that they learn to use the tray before extending their territory. It can also be a good idea to start young kittens off with a 'kitten litter' (such as Kitten Attract), until they are ready to move on to using an adult litter.

Multi-cat households

Inappropriate use of litter tray and spraying are common in multicat homes. Even cats who have previously got along can suddenly start spraying or stop using the litter tray. Cats often don't like sharing litter trays, so it is better if there is one tray per cat, plus an extra one. Extra litter trays are necessary because some cats like to defecate in one and urinate in another. Others will not use a box that has already been used by another cat. Some cats in a multi-cat household (usually the dominant one) might be overprotective over a particular tray (they see it as theirs and nobody else's!) and they may try to intimidate or stop others using it by either attacking the other cat when leaving the litter tray, or by bothering them while they are in the litter-tray which can cause the other cat to avoid using it.

Dirty litter / litter tray

Cats generally prefer to use clean litter. The most common reason for a cats refusing to use a litter tray is because the litter is dirty. Soiled litter should be scooped daily (or more often if required) and the litter tray emptied and filled up with new litter regularly (each type of litter will have instructions as to how often to perform a complete litter change). Don't be over-anxious about cleaning the tray itself too often though - cats like to smell that it's 'their' tray, and that familiarity can prevent them soiling elsewhere. Scooping the soiled litter will be enough to get rid of nasty smells, but scrubbing the tray itself should on average only need to be done every few weeks (less often if you use a good quality clumping litter, or more often if you use a non-clumping litter). When washing the litter tray, use just hot water and a mild dishwashing liquid. Avoid using chemicals that might leave any kind of smell.

Type of litter

The texture of the litter used is also very important. It has to be a litter that the cat likes. Avoid using scented litter as most cats don't seem to like perfumed and chemical smells. We recommend World's Best Cat Litter, which is non perfumed, 100% organic, dust-free and flushable! Also try to avoid the use of litter tray liners as some cats don't like them. Sometimes a cat might show a preference for a certain material such as your carpet. If your cat continuously uses a particular material to eliminate on, use this material to retrain the cat to use the box by replacing the litter temporarily with the preferred material and slowly add litter back into the box while reducing the size of the other material over time.

Soiling outside the litter tray?

If a cat is toileting outside the litter tray, it can help to re-train them by switching temporarily to a 'kitten litter' (such as Kitten Attract), which is often preferred by cats who are not keen on regular litter. Using a kitten litter for a while can get him into the habit of using his tray again, and then slowly re-introduce an adult litter (perhaps by mixing the two to begin with), and eventually it should be possible to switch back to using only an adult litter. Elderly cats may 'miss' the litter tray sometimes, due to dementia or other age-related conditions. It can help to site the tray inside a suitably sized cardboard box with the top and front cut off (as pictured). The three cardboard 'walls' can act as guidance to help them toilet within the tray, and can make them feel 'safer' whilst toileting.



Types of litter tray

Make sure that the litter tray is the right size for the cat. A tray that is too large or too small can put the cat off using it. Some cats don't like covered litter trays as they do not offer an easy escape route, and they can also trap the smells inside, which some cats dislike. If your cat is avoiding a covered tray, simply removing the flap/door may encourage him to use it again. If your cat is avoiding using a regular litter tray, try placing it inside a suitably sized cardboard box with the top and front cut off (as pictured). This set-up won't trap smells inside, allows the cat to feel more private, and also reduces the amount of litter tracked

Cause 3 - Anxiety or Stress Related

If a health issue or problems with the litter tray can be ruled out, then you need to consider that the problem could be anxiety-related.

Spraying - when & where?

Is the cat spraying in one area or several? If the cat has chosen one spot, he may be submissively trying to mark a little territory. Does the spraying occur after an encounter with another cat? It could be hidden aggression.

A change in the cat's environment?

Has there been a change in the household? Any intrusion on the cat's territory, whether human, animal, or even a new piece of furniture or decoration can cause a cat to feel threatened, insecure, and stressed. The more cats in the household, the more likely that one or more of them might develop toilet and spraying problems.

Clean the soiled areas thoroughly and if possible confine the cat in a smaller area until he starts using the litter tray again. The confinement room should be warm and comfortable and equipped with litter-trays, fresh food and water (not near the litter-trays!) and a bed and toys. You should also make sure you visit and interact with the cat regularly so that he doesn't feel 'punished'. This should take no more than a few days, maybe less, and then he can be re-introduced to the rest of the house.

Feeling threatened by other cats / dogs

Cats are at their most vulnerable when they are toileting outside and therefore they may feel threatened by another cat, or dog, or even by any loud noises in the environment such as road works. They may then choose to toilet indoors, even if no litter tray has been provided. Providing a discreetly placed litter tray indoors should take away the feelings of anxiety and encourage him to use this more suitable place. If you wish to then encourage your cat to toilet outside again, one good idea is to designate a specific place in your garden for this purpose. Choose an area of soil quite close to the house (so that he can retreat to the house quickly if he feels under threat) in a quiet corner of the garden. Rake the soil over and mix in a good proportion of peat or sand or paper-based or wood-based litter.

Reassure your cat

Help your cat feel comfortable in his home territory. Play games with him and talk to him frequently in a low and reassuring voice. Give him positive attention and affection and reward him when he uses the litter tray. A confident, secure, and relaxed cat does not need to relieve anxiety and stress by such extreme measures as urine or faecal marking and spraying.

The use of remedial products may also be considered such as [Feliway](#), or Bach Flower Remedies (see under Remedial Products below).

Further Information

Deterrants

Taken on their own, attempts to put the cat off from soiling in a particular place using deterrants such as tin foil, lemon peel etc. may simply result in the cat finding another inconvenient site, and will delay finding out the cause of the behaviour, and therefore are only of value in conjunction with determining the cause. The idea though, is to make the inappropriate toileting spots undesirable and unavailable for your cat. If you are dealing with a spot or two, you may try to put a bowl of food over the area. Cats don't want to eliminate where they eat. If it is possible try putting a litter box over the area and then slowly move it to a more discreet place (gradually). Aluminium foil can be a deterrent, as it makes a sound when sprayed which some cats don't like (although please note that this doesn't work for some cats as they seem to like chewing it which can be dangerous). Others advise using plastic to cover the spots but again

some cats seem to find it rather 'tasty' so you need to be aware of your cat's preferences. Double sided tape seems to work in many cases too.

Remedial Products

Feliway spray (use it to spray on the areas daily) or diffusers in the room(s) can help with the problem but cannot be guaranteed to work with all cats. Bach Flower Remedies are often recommended, they can have an almost immediate effect on pets with no side effects, and can help with many behavioural problems. A combination of Cherry Plum (for the inability to control unwanted behaviour) and Chestnut Bud (for failing to learn from mistakes) has been successful in many cases although other remedies might be required for individual cases.



Cleaning urine stains / Eliminating urine smell

The most effective way to clean urine stains and/or remove the smell of spraying, is to use a good quality enzymatic urine cleaning solution - this will break down the uric acids and salts in the urine. Most home cleaning remedies do not dissolve the enzymes, which then release smells for years, encouraging your pet to continue spraying in that area (a cat can smell an old urine stain, even if you cannot!). Products are available for both soft surfaces (carpets / upholstery etc) and for hard surfaces (floors / cupboards etc). Don't use cleaning products containing ammonia, as your cat is quite likely to urinate there again to cover the smell up, thus continuing the cycle. Avoid using bleach too, as it can cause damage or discolouration to many surfaces.

If spraying is extensive, a urine detector torch (UV 'Blacklight'), will enable you to find the exact locations.

Specialist help

In some cases the problem is more complex than that outlined above, in which case we would advise that you discuss the situation with your veterinary surgeon initially. Occasionally, extreme behavioural problems can be treated with medication but drugs are always best used together with behaviour therapy, and not as a sole solution. Your vet will be able to refer you to a specialist in feline behaviour in your area. Or if you have a specific behavioural issue not covered on this page, you can email Cat Chat's own behavioural adviser as follows:

Links