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Some Reasons Why Cat Stop Using the Litter Box

By

Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

When your cat stops using the litter box it's frustrating and stressful for both cat and cat parent. It's also, sadly, one of the most common reasons that a cat may get a one-way ticket to the nearest shelter. There are many reasons why a cat may avoid the litter box and it's important to figure out the true cause in order to get everything back on track. Inappropriate elimination shouldn't be a deal-breaker when it comes to whether a cat gets to stay in your family or not. While some reasons for litter box aversion may be more complex, there are often some simple mistakes cat parents make. If you're a new cat parent it's especially easy to make some simple errors that may not seem important at the time but those mistakes can have a big effect on how your cat views his toileting set-up. Here's a list of some common reasons for litter box avoidance:

Underlying Medical Issue

When dealing with a litter box problem be sure you look at this possibility first. Don't assume a problem is behavioral without getting your cat checked by the veterinarian in order to rule out any medical cause. It's common for a cat experiencing discomfort upon elimination to associate the box with the pain. It may also be that your cat can't make it to the box in time due to discomfort.

Declawing

Cats who are declawed may continue to feel pain long after the healing period. Some cats' paws remain sensitive for the rest of their lives and the texture of the litter may be too uncomfortable for them. There are so many reasons not to declaw your cat and this is just one of them. If you're on the fence about whether to put your cat through this surgical amputation, please first read the article on our website on declawing.

A Dirty Litter Box

Would you want to use a toilet that is never flushed? Of course not. Cats are very clean animals and if the box is too dirty they will seek other arrangements. Scoop the litter box at least twice a day and completely wash out the box monthly. If you're not using scoopable litter then wash out the box on a weekly basis.

A Covered Litter Box

You may think a covered box is a good idea because it gives the cat some privacy and also confines the litter odor inside the box. The truth is, a covered box isn't cat-friendly. A covered box often makes the cat feel confined. The covered box makes it more inconvenient for you to scoop on a regular basis (out of sight...out of mind). Covered boxes also create more odor because air doesn't get in there to dry the soiled litter. My biggest complaint with a covered box is that it prevents the cat from having escape potential. In a multiple cat household this can be a crucial issue because a cat may avoid the box if he feels he'll get ambushed while in there.

Wrong Sized Box

Don't choose a litter box size based on where it conveniently will fit in a location. Choose a box based on the size of your cat. The box should be about 1 ½ times the length of your cat.

Not Enough Boxes

In multicat homes you should have at the very least the same number of boxes as you have cats. The ideal set-up is actually to have N+1. If there's a litter box issue or if there's any tension, however slight, then you also need to make sure there's an extra box. If you live with just one cat but you have a home with more than one level then there should be a box on each level.

Wrong Location

Location choice should be about convenience and security for the cat and not about what is convenient for the cat parent. Don't put the litter box near the food, in a damp basement, in a closet or near household appliances that may frighten the cat (such as the washing machine). In a multicat household, scatter boxes around the home and don't have them lined up in one room. You don't want a cat developing a litter box aversion problem because he's afraid to cross the path of another cat in order to get into the one room where all the boxes are located. Place a box in each cat's preferred area.

Litter Box Liners

Litter box liners are created for the convenience of the cat parent but they often tear due to the cat's claws. It's also easy for urine to form pools in the folds of the plastic and that creates an odor problem. Since texture is important to cats you also have to keep in mind how the plastic may create discomfort when a cat is trying to dig and cover his waste.

Not Enough Litter in the Box

Don't be stingy when it comes to filling the litter box. If you don't want to create an odor problem, put an adequate amount of litter in the box and keep the level consistent. In general, about 3 inches of litter is a good amount. As you scoop, periodically top off the litter with a bit more to keep a consistent amount.

The Wrong Litter

In general, cats like an unscented, sand-like substrate. They like the soft feel on their paws and the sand-like litter makes it easy for digging and covering. Cats also don't want to smell all the flowery, perfumed litters. Keep in mind how close your cat's nose will be to the litter when he's in the box. Texture is also important when it comes to litter. There are so many litters on the market created to appeal to the convenience of the cat parent but in many cases they're just a litter box problem waiting to happen. While some cats may prefer the texture of an alternative litter, most prefer an unscented, soft, scoopable litter.

Stress and Environment

Whether the stress is due to multicat issues, household chaos or sudden changes (such as a move, renovation, new baby, new spouse, etc.), the effect can end up being litter box aversion. Cats are creatures of habit who don't adjust well to abrupt changes or chaotic environments. A litter box avoidance problem may be the result of your cat being too fearful to even peek his head out from under the bed. Address multicat tension issues and/or environmental factors in order to provide your cat a sense of security and safety in his own territory.

Going High-Tech

Electronic self-cleaning boxes have so many downsides that I don't even know where to start. Many of them have motors that are frightening. Some are so big but the actual surface area for the cat is too small. Many self-cleaning boxes have covers as well. Even though some of these boxes are timed to not activate the cleaning until 10 minutes after the cat has left the box it doesn't account for another cat entering. Some rakes in the boxes easily clog when there's a large clump due to diarrhea. The other important downside to a self-cleaning box is that you

are prevented from monitoring what is or isn't happening in the litter box. When you clean the box it's an opportunity to check on your cat's health. It's during cleaning time that you may notice constipation, diarrhea, a larger-than-normal urine clump or no urine clump at all.

Strong Cleansers

Strong-smelling household cleansers may leave enough of a strong scent on the plastic box that it drives the cat away. When you clean the box use bleach that is heavily diluted in hot water or you can even use dish soap that is very diluted. When you're done cleaning you don't want to have any traces of scent on the plastic. To give you an idea of how sensitive a cat's nose is, he has 67 million scent receptors compared to the 5 million that humans have.

Litter Scatter Mats

These mats are designed to catch the litter that gets trapped on the cat's paws as he exits the litter box. Some mats may have a texture that cats find uncomfortable.

Punishment

I include this on the list because it's important to know that a cat may avoid the box because he has been punished for eliminating in other locations. When you punish a cat for peeing or pooping outside of the box, the messages he receives are 1) he should be afraid of you, and 2) peeing and pooping will get him in trouble. Even though you think you're teaching him that his location choice is what you objected to, the message he got was to avoid peeing and pooping when you're around. Punishment also means you assume the cat is misbehaving and in reality, he isn't. If a cat isn't using his litter box it's because he feels he can't. Your job is to figure out why. Punishment is inhumane and counter-productive.

Need More Information?

For more specific help when it comes to setting up a litter box or dealing with litter box aversion issues, refer to any of the books by [Pam Johnson-Bennett](#) including the most recent release [Think Like a Cat](#) (Penguin Books).



Covered Litter Boxes... The Real Scoop

By

Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

When it comes to choosing a litter box for your cat, you may think a covered one is a good choice because it offers privacy for the cat and hides all those things you don't want to see or smell but there are some facts to consider before making that purchase. Much of the success or failure of a particular litter box has to do with the size of the box, how clean it's kept, where it's located, the number of boxes per cat and one other very important factor: the type of box itself. So let's examine whether a covered box is cat-friendly or not.

From Our Perspective

From the cat parent's perspective, a covered box seems ideal. It offers:

- ✓ *privacy*
- ✓ *litter scatter control*
- ✓ *the ability to keep the cat's pee and poop from being on display*
- ✓ *a confined way of keeping odor inside the box*

If we look at it from the human's point of view, a covered box appears, at least initially, to be a dream-come-true. It keeps everything neat and tidy inside the box and no one but the cat has to look at it. Unfortunately though, many behavior problems occur because we, as cat parents, look at a cat's environment from *our* point of view and neglect to see things from *the cat's perspective*.

The Cat's Perspective

If you "think like a cat" you'll start to look at the covered litter box in an entirely different light:

- ✓ A covered box can make a larger cat feel cramped while in there
- ✓ Covered boxes don't allow as much air circulation so it takes longer for litter to dry
- ✓ Odor is contained in the box, so it can be more offensive to the cat who is inside

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- ✓ A covered box limits a cat's visual field to see if another companion animal is approaching
- ✓ A covered box limits a cat's escape potential and can create opportunities for being ambushed
- ✓ A covered box may not get scooped often enough

Privacy vs Safety

This is, by far, my biggest issue with covered boxes. While we're busy worrying about privacy, a cat is worried about safety. Being in the litter box puts a cat in a vulnerable position. If you have a multicat household and there's the least bit of tension between cats, imagine how stressful it could be for one cat to go into a covered box where there's only one way in and out. I've often seen situations where one cat uses the opportunity to ambush another cat in the litter box. It's not unusual to see one cat sitting on the top of the box, ready to pounce as soon as the other cat exits the litter box. In this situation, the cat who is being ambushed will often decide to choose a much safer location for elimination. That location choice is often out in the open with more visual warning time so the cat has the chance to get away when an opponent enters the room.

There doesn't even have to be tension in a multicat home for a cat to feel vulnerable in a covered box with no escape potential. It could just take one or two times of a cat being surprised by another cat having to use the box at the same time. It could be the family dog who sticks his nose in the box or even a toddler following the cat as he heads to the litter box. The bottom line is if a cat feels the litter box is not a safe location, his survival instinct will tell him to seek another option for elimination.

Olfactory Assault

Another thing to think about is how a covered litter box must appear to an animal equipped with such incredible senses. Since your cat's nose is often so close to the litter substrate itself, imagine how unpleasant it is to be in a covered box that doesn't have enough air circulation to adequately dry the litter. The smell in the box could be overpowering enough to drive a cat away.

Cramped Accommodations

Many litter boxes, open or covered, are often too small. I recommend to my clients that they purchase large storage containers and then cut an entrance on one side for the cat to have easy access. Combine the fact that many litter boxes are too small with putting a cover on as well, and you have a cramped, unappealing litter box set-up. For many cats, the only way to use the box is to crouch down or stick their heads out the entrance.

Out of Sight... Out of Mind

I scoop my cat's litter box at least twice a day. When I walk by the box, if I see she has eliminated, I stop and scoop. It takes just a few seconds to do daily litter box maintenance. With a covered box, however, you may not notice the cat has eliminated so you may just walk past without scooping. It also takes more time to scoop because you have to remove the top.

Inconvenient to Clean

While you may initially think a covered box will keep things neater, it actually creates more work for you. In order to scoop the box you have to remove the cover. When it comes time to thoroughly scrub the box you now have two parts of the box to clean instead of just one.

A Better Alternative

If you're thinking about a covered box in order to control litter scatter, or if you have a cat who sprays in the box, choose a high-sided, open box instead. A large plastic storage container with high sides will work. All you have to do is cut out a low entrance on one side. There are also some manufacturers who make high-sided litter boxes and depending upon the size of your cat or whether he sprays in the box, one of these litter boxes may work for you. If not, a plastic storage container is an excellent option. Sterlite makes plastic storage containers that work great as litter boxes.

Need More Information?

For more specifics on how to create the ideal litter box set-up and how to avoid litter box problems, refer to any of [Pam's](#) books, including the book experts consider the cat bible, [Think Like a Cat](#).



Why Cats Spray By Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

Even though you may not be able to see it, if your cat sprays in your home you can definitely smell it. The unmistakable odor indicates all is not peaceful in your cat's universe. When a cat sprays, it can put everyone in crisis mode and it can put the cat at risk of being relinquished to the shelter, given away or sadly, even euthanized. Many people don't understand why cats spray so they don't understand how to effectively deal with it.

Many people misunderstand the motivation behind spray-marking behavior. All-too-often, cat parents simply label the behavior as territorial marking but that isn't the only reason cats spray. Unless you can uncover the true cause for the behavior, you won't have much success in stopping it. So it's time to sharpen your detective skills and do some undercover work.

Note: whenever you're dealing with any behavior that involves a cat not using the litter box, it's crucial you have him examined by the veterinarian. Even if you're sure the problem is behavioral, it's important to rule out underlying medical causes.

Spraying vs. Indiscriminate Urination

To start with, you need to know that there's a difference between *spraying* and *indiscriminate urination*. If a cat urinates outside of the litter box doesn't necessarily mean he's spraying. These are two different behaviors and can have different causes. Indiscriminate urination is usually done on horizontal surfaces. Spray-marking is usually done up against vertical objects but some cats will spray regardless of whether there is a vertical surface present. In this case, the sprayed urine will form a thin line as opposed to the typical puddle during urination. The posture for spraying is different from normal urination. When a cat sprays he typically backs up to the object, twitches his tail and begins treading with his front paws. He may also close his eyes while spraying. When a cat (male or female) displays normal urination, he usually squats.

When a cat indiscriminately urinates there may be an underlying medical cause or the conditions in the litter box may be unappealing. Even if the box is kept clean there may be

something about the set-up that's not appealing. There could also be something going on in the environment causing stress to the cat or making him feel as if it's not safe to use the litter box.

Communication is Why Cats Spray

When a cat sprays, it's a form of communication. Surprising to many cat parents, both male and female cats can spray. I've seen so many cases where cat parents completely overlooked the female cat and were convinced (incorrectly) it was the male doing the spraying. The pheromones in urine spray reveal lots of information about the sprayer. It's the feline version of a resume. Spraying should be viewed as an outward sign that a cat is communicating something. It shouldn't be viewed as a bad or spiteful behavior. Even though we certainly don't like the idea of a cat spraying inside our home, it's important to remember that it's a normal reaction to particular situation in the feline world.

Some common reasons cats spray:

- to define the perimeter for other cats
- to create a familiar scent in his territory
- Some cats will spray a family member's belongings as a way of self-soothing by mixing scents
- A cat may spray a family member's personal belongings (such as a pillow or dirty clothes) as a way of creating a bond
- A cat may spray a family member's belongings if that family member's schedule has changed or something else about the person's behavior is different
- A cat might spray a family member's belongings if he isn't sure whether the person presents a threat
- Since scent and familiarity play important roles in the feline world, some cats spray new objects brought into the environment
- A cat may spray if he is denied access to another cat who may appear to be a threat (typically this is caused by the appearance of an unfamiliar cat in the yard)
- A cat might spray if anxious, even if there doesn't seem to be an obvious trigger from a human's perspective
- Cats may spray as a challenge to another cat
- A cat may spray as a victory display after a hostile altercation with another cat
- A fearful cat may spray only when there are no other cats or humans around
- Intact cats spray when looking for mates

Confident and non-confident cats spray. A confident cat may spray as a grand display of his victory after a confrontation with another cat. A less-than confident cat might spray-mark as a form of covert aggression. It's a way of giving a warning without actually having to risk a physical altercation.

The sprayed urine reveals information such as age, sex, sexual availability and status. These are important facts when it comes to cat-to-cat communication, especially in an outdoor environment where close encounters could result in injury or death.

Not all cats spray and if you gradually ease your cat through changes in his life such as the information of a new spouse, new pet, new baby, new house, etc., you'll greatly reduce the chances that he'll feel the need to spray. And of course, if you have an intact male cat you stand a 100% chance of spray-marking behavior so it's a very wise idea to have him neutered. If your intact male is currently displaying spray-marking behavior, having him neutered will, in almost all cases, stop the spraying behavior.

Managing a Sprayer

If you have a multicat household, the first step is to identify the sprayer. Unless you've actually witnessed the cat spray-marking, the most reliable form of CSI is by using a video surveillance. Set up a motion detector camera, use a webcam or you can even put a kitty cam on your cat's collar. The latter won't show you the spraying but it'll hopefully show what the sprayer was reacting to when he felt the need to mark.

The targeted areas need to be addressed:

- Clean the soiled area with a product labeled for cleaning and neutralizing cat urine
- Change the cat's association with that area by engaging in playtime there so it becomes a positive location
- Use clicker training to click and reward whenever the cat walks by the area without spraying or walks away from an area when called
- Use a synthetic pheromone spray near the targeted areas so help change the cat's association
- To prevent further damage to carpets or furniture, you can cover the area with a shower curtain liner temporarily
- In some cases, the area may need to be closed off completely while you work on behavior modification

If your cat has targeted one or two areas repeatedly, place litter boxes there that have high sides (but not covered boxes) because the cat may be satisfied with spraying inside the litter box. You can use a plastic storage container (Sterilite makes great ones) and just cut a low opening on one side

If the spraying is due to the appearance of an outdoor cat, you'll need to block viewing access. Cover the bottom on the windows with an opaque window paper that will allow the light to come in but blur your cat's view of any feline interlopers. If the reason cats are coming into your yard is because you've set up bird feeders, you'll have to take them away or reposition them (if possible) so they aren't such an appealing target. If you know who owns the feline intruder, perhaps you can have a tactful discussion about the situation. If the appearance of outdoor cats is a real problem in your yard, you may have to consider fencing. There are companies that make cat-proof fencing. Many of my clients have also had success with motion-activated sprinklers.

Speaking of outdoors, if you allow your cat outside, that may be contributing to the spraying behavior. While some indoor/outdoor cats may restrict their marking to the outdoors, your cat may feel threatened by unfamiliar scents he encounters and might bring his spraying behavior inside as well.

Here are some additional guidelines for helping a sprayer:

- Reduce household stress if possible (chaotic environment, erratic schedules, improper new pet introductions, etc)
- increase vertical territory
- Make sure your cat has safe areas to retreat such as hiding places, cat trees, cat beds
- In a multicat environment make sure everyone has their own favorite perching spot
- In a multicat environment increase the number of litter boxes and scatter them throughout the house so no one has to pass an opponent's area in order to eliminate
- Set up more than one feeding station so no one has to compete when you have more than one cat
- If you think your cat is about to engage in spraying, distract him with an enticing sound to change his mindset from negative to positive (for example, roll a ping pong ball in the opposite direction)
- Incorporate daily individual interactive playtime to help reduce anxiety and increase feelings of confidence and security
- Increase environmental enrichment to create constructive and positive diversions
- In some multicat household cases, cats may need to be separated so a reintroduction can be done
- If the cat is spraying a family member's items, have that family member be the one who offers the meals and also have that person engage the cat in interactive play
- If the cat is spraying a family member's items, use a synthetic pheromone spray on some of the clothes to help the cat think he has facially rubbed those items
- If spraying is done as a bonding behavior with a family member, increased playtime and environmental enrichment may help build confidence

- Ease your cat through changes rather than force him to endure abrupt ones

Spraying Behavior is Complex

This article is just meant to provide a general road map for you. Your cat's situation is unique so take time to carefully evaluate your cat's environment and his behavior. The spraying behavior is a normal communication tool (yes, I understand it's not one humans like very much) but with time and a solid game plan, you'll hopefully be able to find a solution that works for both the cat and the human family members.

Seeking Professional Help

If you're not having success with behavior modification, talk to your veterinarian about whether the cat may benefit from behavioral medication. If your cat is put on medication, keep in mind this is to be an adjunct to behavior modification.

Your veterinarian may also refer you to a veterinary behaviorist, certified applied animal behaviorist or a certified cat behavior consultant. A qualified professional can help in pinpointing the cause of the behavior and set up a customized behavior modification plan