



## PENINSULA HUMANE SOCIETY

Advocating quality and compassion for all life

# LITTERBOX TRAINING and SPRAYING

## Cause

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

## Treatment

### Prevention

Until she is 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 the cat teaches her 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, the cat should be confined to a single room, such as a kitchen, bathroom, utility room, basement or garage. Provide her with 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 the housesoiling has been cured, the cat should have a regular feeding schedule, so she will develop a corresponding elimination schedule.

Sometimes confinement will alleviate the problem. But it is not a solution. It is 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.

***Keep 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 only 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 1 1/2 inches of fresh litter, preferably the unscented kind.

Make sure the litterbox is in an appropriate place. Cats do not like to soil the area close to their sleeping or eating area, so try to locate the box some distance away from those. The box should be in an accessible but quiet place. If the cat is new to the house, she may go into hiding 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 inhibiting your cat from using the litterbox, so put down an extra one in a different location. If there is more than one cat in the house, have several litterboxes available.

## Rewards

In order to reward the cat for using her box, you must be there when she needs to eliminate. Here are some ways to predict when your cat will use her box.



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Most cats (especially kittens) will want to eliminate immediately after waking. In addition, they will usually defecate and sometimes urinate within a half-hour after eating and exercise.

If the cat's edible input is provided on a regular schedule, the output will follow likewise. Before feeding her, spend ten to fifteen minutes playing with her. Then feed her, allowing her 15 minutes to eat. Remove any leftovers. Have another gentle play session after her meal.

Part of the playtime can consist of calling her to her litterbox from a variety of places around the house, particularly areas where she has soiled. 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 the litterbox. Encourage her to hop into the box, and praise her when she does so. Even if she does not eliminate, she is learning that 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 being punished. If she does eliminate, 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 that they are likely to 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 both 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 comes to visit. 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 of this problem is directed toward helping your cat feel more secure, relaxed, and content.

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

Altering 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, and roaming. 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.

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