



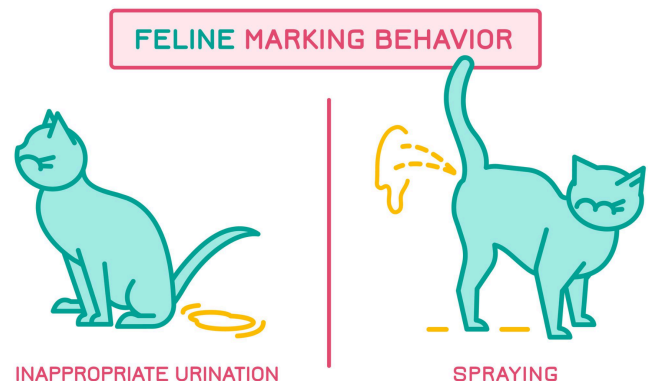
## Litter Box Usage

There are several reasons why a cat may eliminate outside of their litter box, and it is a complicated issue. Follow the guidelines below to help ensure the best chances of having successful litter box usage and for some troubleshooting advice if your cat has started to use the bathroom outside their box.

First and foremost, if your cat suddenly starts using the bathroom outside their litter box, it is always recommended to first make sure that your cat is cleared medically of any potential illness. Medical issues such as urinary tract infections, bladder stones, kidney health, constipation, and many other causes could factor into why a cat is not using the litter box. If an underlying medical issue is causing elimination to be painful, then your cat will start to associate the litter box with pain and try to find an alternative location. **Setting up an appointment with your veterinarian is the first step with litter box usage issues.**

Also try to determine if your cat is **eliminating or marking/spraying** (see picture to the right). If your cat is spraying/marking, this could be a sign of anxiety/stress related to his environment or internal state (have there been any major changes in you or your cat's routine/environment recently?). If your cat is eliminating on your clothing, bedding, or other items such as backpacks, shoes, etc., there could be an environmental stimulus that is causing stress or fear. They choose these items because they smell like you (**not because they don't like you or are**

**mad**), and meshing their scent with yours can help comfort them and provide a sense of security. Conversely, if there's a new person or animal coming into the home and your cat is eliminating on their items, then they could be trying to cover up that person's scent with their own, which is comforting to the cat. If this is the case, try to eliminate the trigger or use management to prevent it (don't leave items on the floor or where they could be eliminated on, provide the cat with a "safe space" when triggers are present, etc). If management isn't possible, they may benefit from anxiety medication or a pheromone diffuser (such as Feliway). Another possibility is that there may be cats that come around outside near your house that are causing your cat to feel insecure about their territory and mark it (more common in males, and often near doors/around walls). If this is the case, neutering often solves the problem, as well as cleaning up all urine with an **enzymatic cleaner** to eliminate the smell, which is essential. If the cleaner isn't specifically intended to completely eliminate urine smells, the cat



will still be able to smell the urine (though you won't), and will continue to urinate there.

Make sure you have a proper **number** of litter boxes available to your cat(s). The general rule is to have **one litter box for each cat in the home plus one**. For example if you just have one cat in the home then, there should ideally be two litter boxes. If you have two cats in the home, there should be three litter boxes set up and available for them to use, etc.

Try to determine if it's the **type of litter** itself your cat is avoiding by trying different kinds (clay, sand, flakes, pellets, etc). Certain textures/odors of the litter may cause cats to avoid litter boxes. An unscented, fine sand-like substrate will **typically** be a cat's most preferred type of litter (though not necessarily always). Anything scented may be too harsh or overwhelming for your cat's nose and create an aversion to the box. A pellet-type litter may be too hard on their paws and/or may be too difficult to dig in. **Cats who have been declawed may need special litter due to the pain that the litter causes their joints**, so be sure to consider this as well.

Besides the type of litter, also consider the **type of box**. Choosing the best litter box for your cat's preferences may require some trial and error, just like the litter. A litter box should be at least 1.5-2 times the size of your cat (though it is possible the litter box may be either too big or too small to your cat, so again—trial and error!). **Most cats will prefer boxes with lower sides and without a cover or flap**, as they are easier to get in and out of, though again, not always—some cats may prefer a box with high sides or even a covered box. **Cats often don't like litter box liners either**, and importantly, **many cats simply will not even enter an automatic/self-cleaning box** due to the noise (especially if it activated while your cat was in it!). You can always try getting multiple kinds of boxes and set them all up at once to test which your cat prefers by which one they use the most.

Litter box location is also a very important factor in usage. Be sure that all litter boxes are set up in an easily accessible area (*to your cat!*) and are away from any air vents, drafty areas, or loud noises that are either continual (washer/drier for example) or may go off unexpectedly and scare your cat (alarms). Ideally, this location should not be in a high-traffic area (middle of busy room/by a door) or an area in which the cat may feel cornered or have limited entrance and escape routes (like the end of a hallway or a corner/cubby hole—which are places we often like to put litter boxes, but deter cats because they make them feel trapped—remember they are prey animals). Litter boxes should also be **as far away from their food and water bowls as possible**, as cats do not like to eliminate near their food or water sources. Another factor that influences whether cats use their box or not is how clean it is. Just like us, they don't like to go into and step on their own urine or poop. Keep the litter boxes clean, **scooping them out once or twice a day and doing a deep clean of the box at least every two weeks** using warm soapy water (soap should be unscented), and **never harsh or smelly cleaners**, which may also be aversive to your cat and cause them to avoid the box.

If you have multiple cats, this could also be a factor in why one (or more) isn't using the litter box. Sometimes even if it seems that the cats get along, one or more may be "guarding" the litter box or area around it by frequently being present, sitting, lying, or even walking by, causing less secure/confident cats avoid the litter box in an attempt to avoid any conflict with the other cat(s). This may be happening even if the more confident cat(s) are not *intentionally* guarding

the space, but the cat eliminating outside the box is just less confident and secure. If this is the case, consider confidence building for the cat eliminating outside the box, and also providing more litter boxes so that they have more options and less opportunity for other cats to “guard” the space (whether intentional or not).

If your cat used the litter box before and is suddenly avoiding it, try to consider if maybe something happened while they were using the litter box that may have scared them and is now causing them to avoid it. If this is the case, moving the litter box to a new location (even temporarily and **gradually** moving it back to the space it was in **over time**) may be a good move. Sometimes this is difficult or impossible to know, as it may have happened while you were not present, so trying a new litter box location is a good general troubleshoot.

Also, if your cat is using the bathroom outside the litter box, is it in the same general area each time? Consider the significance of that area to your cat, and put a litter box there if possible (or as close to that area as possible). You can again **gradually** move the litter box over time if you need to. Also depending on the area, you can try setting up a food/water station, or bedding, in the area they’re using the bathroom to deter your cat from using the bathroom there (temporarily while you also encourage your cat to use the litter box in a new area), as again, they don’t like to go to the bathroom near where they eat, drink, or rest. If the food/water/bedding doesn’t work, you can try using aluminum foil or upside down office mats/carpet runners (with nubs up) to deter your cat from using the bathroom in that area. **But be aware:** if you use any of these methods to deter your cat, you must be sure to provide appropriate litter/boxes, in a suitable location for your cat, keep them clean, and **encourage** them to go to the bathroom there by rewarding them when they do—aversives only work when your cat has another alternative solution, and should **never** be used before your cat has seen the vet and has a clean bill of health.

As a last resort, reestablish the habit of using the litter box by confining the cat to a **small space** with only enough space for the their food, water, bedding, toys, and a litter box (remember the food, water, and bedding should be at least a few feet away from the litter box). This works similarly to using a crate to house train a dog, as they are not likely to go to the bathroom in their eating or resting space. Only let the cat out after the habit has been reestablished and they have been using the box exclusively for a week or two, slowly allowing it out for a longer time every day and supervising 100% of the time when out of the space, until they have not eliminated outside the box for at least a couple weeks and can be trusted to free roam again.