

HOUSE TRAINING – USING THE LITTER BOX

Indian Hills Animal Clinic

Excellence In Small Animal

Do I need to train my new kitten to use a litter box?

Most cats by nature use a soil type surface for elimination. By providing a litter box with an appropriate and appealing substrate (material), few cats will need to be trained to use it. At about 30-36 days of age kittens leave the nest to search out a loose substrate for elimination. The kitten learns specific areas and substrates to use by observation of the queen (mother). Although some cats, especially those on their own property will dig and bury their wastes, many cats only partly cover their feces especially if they are off of their home territory. Some cats do not bury urine or stools at all, even on their own property and, for obvious reasons these cats may prove harder to litter train.

How can I help train my new cat to use the litter box in the area that I have selected?

Initially it is best that the kitten be confined to a small area with an appropriate sized litter box. This allows you to take advantage of a cat's tendency to eliminate in a loose material. As long as the kitty litter is easily accessible and is the only loose substrate available, very little effort should be required to litter box train the kitten. About the only other indoor area that might be equally or more appealing to some cats is the soil around houseplants. Ensuring that the cat is prevented from getting into houseplants, except when you are around to supervise deals with this problem. Another option is to move the houseplants into a room where the cat does not have access, or to place decorative pebbles or rocks over top of the soil. Kittens may need to eliminate after they eat, after they wake up and after play. At those times, you might place the kitten in its litter box and praise or give a treat for elimination. A kitten does not need to be confined continuously, but should be supervised to prevent accidents and frequently brought back to the appropriate elimination location. A little of the urine or stool odor from previous elimination should help to attract the cat back to the box. In fact, if the kitten soils in a location other than its box on the first attempt, clean up the area thoroughly using a product that is designed to neutralize cat urine odor (see our behavior resources handout for more details), and perhaps even move a small amount of the stool or a few drops of the urine to the box to attract the cat to that area. If there is more than one cat in the home, at least one more litter box should be added to the home. By confining the kitten to an area with its own box, the kitten can establish regular litter habits without competition or threats from the other cats. This also provides for a more gradual and cautious introduction of the kittens to the other cats.

What type of litter material should I use?

There are many types of litter materials available today. These include clay litter, fine "clumping" litter, plastic pearls, silica, recycled newspapers, wood shavings and many others. Some have materials added to control odor although scented litters may be aversive to some cats. The type you choose is up to you, although you might wish to seek guidance as to which litter types are safest if you have a kitten that tends to eat litter (as some young kittens do). Since the kitten will first start eliminating by following the cues of the queen, continuing with the same litter as used in the first home is helpful. Some studies have found that clumping litter may be preferable to more cats.

What size and type of litter box should I buy?

Initially, the size of the litter box should be determined by the size of the kitten or cat. A very small kitten may need a box with shorter (lower) sides or a ramp for easier access. As the kitten grows, a larger box is generally more appropriate. Some owners prefer litter boxes with covers on them. This is acceptable if it is acceptable to the cat. You need to be sure that the cat can negotiate the opening by stepping into it and that the cat is not too large to fit into the opening. Over time be certain to increase the size of the box if necessary to accommodate the cat's needs.

Where should I put the litter box?

The litter box should be placed in a location that is easily accessed by the cat, yet out of the way. Try to avoid congested household areas. The cat should have some privacy and quiet to eliminate. Laundry and furnace rooms are often used but be sure that noise from household equipment is not disruptive and aversive to your cat. Make sure that the cat does not get locked out of the room at a time when it may have to eliminate. Try to put the litter box in an area that is convenient for you to check on and keep clean. Do not put food and water bowls immediately next to the litter box. If there are dogs in the home, then the litter box should be located where the cat can eliminate without being bothered by them.



Litter Box Training

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How often should I clean the litter box?

One of the most important factors in continued litter box usage by house cats is cleanliness. Cats are very fastidious animals, and spend time each day making sure their coat, feet and face are clean. One can assume that they would like a clean place to eliminate. The number of cats in the home and litter usage determines the time between litter cleaning. Fecal material should be removed after each bowel movement, if possible and the box should be cleaned or scooped of urine wastes on a daily basis, whether the litter material type is clumping or plain. Litter should be changed weekly. Some clumping litters form fairly hard clumps (which may not be flushable) that are easy to scoop in their entirety and leave little residue behind. These types of litter may only need to have the box cleaned every few weeks; however remember to refill the litter to maintain sufficient depth after each scooping. Remember that each cat is an individual. Your cat may like more frequent cleaning of the litter box to maintain good usage patterns. Some cats dislike the odor of the cleansers used to clean litter boxes, so rinse the box thoroughly after each cleaning. A number of products are self-cleaning and this can be particularly appealing to some cats. However some cats might be frightened of the motors and cleaning mechanisms.



How many litter boxes do I need in my home?

The number of litter boxes needed depends on the number of cats, the size of the home, the temperament of the cat, and other pets in the home. When there are multiple cats, multiple pans should be available in different locations, not all side-by-side in one place. Because there can be varied interactions between individuals, multiple boxes in multiple locations allow housemates to avoid one another if they so choose. Even for only one cat, two boxes may be appropriate depending on the layout of the home and the individual preferences of the cat. Some cats prefer one box for urine and one for stool. Some physical limitation may prevent a cat from climbing stairs and so a box in the location the cat frequents is needed. In general, there should be at least one litter box per cat; however, if soiling problems arise, most behaviorists advise one more box than the number of cats in the house.

What if the kitten does not use its litter box?

Should the kitten begin to eliminate in locations other than its litter box, first review the steps above. Is the litter in an area that is appealing and easily accessed by the cat? Is the litter box being cleaned often enough? Are there enough litter boxes for the number of cats? Try and determine what there is about the area that your cat is soiling that is so appealing to your cat. And perhaps most important is there anything about the area, box or litter that might be preventing its use (or scaring your cat)? To determine the most appealing litter for your cat, offer two or more different litters in the same type of box, side-by-side and see which one, if any, the cat uses most frequently. Next, determine the type of litter box the cat prefers by offering two or more litter box types side-by-side (each with the preferred type of litter). You can determine the cat's preferred location by offering the preferred litter box with the preferred litter in two or more locations and determining which one, if any, the cat uses more frequently. If litter box problems persist, then additional guidance and perhaps a behavior consultation might be required. (Also see our handout on 'House-soiling in cats'). If however, the cat begins to lift its tail, and spray urine onto vertical objects, then this is a marking behavior and would indicate that its time to consider neutering (if your cat is an intact male) or that an anxiety or territorial problem is emerging and professional guidance should be sought. (Also see our handout on Urine Marking in cats).

This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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