

# Thinking Outside The Box

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Inappropriate elimination is the number one reason cats and kittens are relinquished to animal shelters. This is regrettable since taking a well thought-out, proactive approach could have helped to prevent many of these problems from arising in the first place.

The vast majority of concerns that crop up with inappropriate elimination are usually environmental, or household-based, rather than focused on the cat. With that in mind, it is important to consider potential problems before any actual inappropriate elimination occurs.

Like anything in life, it is always easier to prevent problems rather than going back and attempting to “fix” a problem once it has already begun. It is also important to understand that once a cat starts to eliminate outside of the box, she might find it more convenient, comfortable or safe to continue to eliminate in this manner. For all of these reasons, it is always better to be proactive concerning litter box problems.

Since you want your cat to become “addicted” to using her litter box, make sure that you always consider your cat’s point of view when looking to provide the optimum scenario for your cat’s elimination habits. And remember, what works for one cat may not work for another. Be flexible and open to trying new things.

## COVERED OR UNCOVERED?

When considering environmental or household-based factors, the litter box itself is always the first area of concern. Recognizing the potential for litter box problems starts with the type of box and litter, in addition to the location of the box.

Covered litter boxes seem like a nice solution to a messy problem, but many cats find them too confining and sometimes downright scary to enter. This is especially true if there is another cat in the household who might be ambushing the cat in question when she emerges from a covered litter box.

Covered litter boxes are primarily for human convenience rather than for the cat’s comfort, although it is true that some cats do like and even prefer them. If you have two cats and one prefers a covered box and the other an open box, it is suggested that you provide them with both. While some cats may find a covered box too confining, others enjoy the privacy it provides.

Many inappropriate elimination problems can be solved by simply taking the cover off the box; others are solved by adding a cover. It is up to you to play detective and figure out what your cat likes.

## AUTOMATIC BOXES

If you are unable to keep up with scooping your litter box because of time or having a multi-cat household, you may want to consider investing in one of the automatic litter boxes.



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These boxes pay off in the long run if you have a fastidious cat who needs an absolutely clean box at all times. They are also great for keeping “snacking” dogs from helping themselves to a bit of “Kitty Roca” (feel free to say “ewww” now).

Be warned however, some cats find the noise these boxes make to be scary. If you think that your cat might fall into that category, do not waste your money. You will end up having an expensive and unusual looking flower planter.

## ROLL IT, BABY!

Rolling litter boxes can be a decent cleaning solution for single cat homes. These boxes are covered, and are designed to roll over, depositing all the litter clumps into a tray that can be easily dumped into the trash.

Two warnings apply. First, if your cat does not like covered litter boxes, this is not a solution to try! Secondly, these boxes actually do not have that much space inside (about one third is taken up with the sifting and collecting part of the box). This means that a large cat will have a hard time fitting into the box. If this happens, your cat may decide not to use it at all in favor of a more comfortable place, or you may develop a problem with a cat that “misses” the box by hanging out over the edge when she goes.

## COLOR

Unlikely as it may seem, another consideration is litter box color. While cats see very little color, some seem to have a preference for boxes of certain colors. If this seems to be the case with your cat, indulge her! No one will mind if a pink litter box does not match the rest of your décor.

## SIZE MATTERS

Consider your cat’s body type to determine if your box might be too small for her to use reliably. It is important that your cat has plenty of room to stand and turn around in the box. If you notice your cat standing with her paws on the outside or the edge of the box, it is time to get a larger box.

If you have multiple cats, a larger box is better. Even if your cats are petite and can use a small box, a small box fills up more quickly.

Height is also a factor. Kittens may have a hard time climbing into a tall-sided box. Tall boxes also present problems for old or injured cats where mobility and pain issues may prevent clambering over the side. Again, when it is difficult to get in, cats often choose somewhere else more convenient and comfortable. An easy solution even without buying a new, shorter box is to cut one side a bit lower so it is easier for your cat to get in and out.



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## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The basic rules for litter box placement are that there must be easy access and that it should be away from too much noise and activity.

Be sure that access is easy! If your cat must climb up or down a flight of stairs, or venture into a cluttered room to find her box, she may decide it is easier to use the carpet or couch where she normally spends her time. This is especially true for older or ill cats, those new to your home, or shy cats that may find it scary making such a trek.

Litter boxes should not be placed near your cat's food. Would you want to take your meals in the bathroom?

Many cats like privacy when using the litter box. If regularly startled or interrupted when trying to use the box, a cat may decide to find a quieter, calmer location to do her business. This is why laundry rooms, hallways, and similar noisy or high-traffic areas may not cut it for many cats. When she is unhappy, she will seek out real estate that is more desirable to her. This may translate into the back of your closet or behind your couch. To prevent this, considering a litter box location that you find less than ideal may be necessary.

## NUMBER OF BOXES

The general rule is that there should be one litter box per cat plus one extra box. In addition, these boxes should ideally be located in different places. Lastly, each box should also have multiple routes for approaching and leaving so that other cats are not able to stage an ambush.

Obviously, not everyone needs to follow this rule. Each cat is different in her preferences. However, some cats insist on having one box to urinate in and one box to defecate in. In multi-cat households, some cats may refuse to use a box that the other one has already used.

## LITTER TYPE AND TEXTURE

There are so many litter options on the market that a decision on what is best for your cat may be difficult. Remember though, the decision really does revolve around your cat, not around whether you want the litter to smell like artificial flowers or look like diamonds. Cats are very picky about scent and texture, and what appeals to you may send your cat running.

The best way to decide is to let your cat do it for you. This will mean experimenting with a couple different boxes containing different types and textures of litter, sort of like those commercials where they put out two kinds of food and see which one the pet runs to first. It is extremely important that you find the brand that your cat likes to avoid problems later. If necessary, it is worth spending a little extra now in order to avoid paying for steam cleaning later!



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Once you find something your cat likes, be sure to stick to it. Cats are creatures of habit and following the “what’s on sale this week” method of buying litter will most likely be unsuccessful. Save yourself the headache and stick to what works.

## Clay Litters:

Clay litters are the time-honored choice of most cat parents. These are fine and many cats prefer this type of product. Considerations for your cat when choosing a clay litter are both textures and scenting agents that are added to help with odor control. Some cats like the soft, sandy litters while others like the grittier ones. Some do not mind odor control agents while others turn their tails up at scented litter. These will all be factors in making a good choice for your cat.

If your cat was an outdoor cat that is now inside all the time, you may want a texture that is closer to dirt or sand (you might also consider adding small amounts of either to give your cat the feel of the “great outdoors”).

If you adopted your cat from a shelter, it is helpful to find out what sort of litter they used at the shelter and if it was successful. If the answer is yes, this is a good place to start. Even better, some shelters ask litter box questions when the cat enters its doors and will share this information with the adopters. This way, the new pet parents will know what worked or didn’t work for the cat in her previous home.

## Clumping Litters:

These are very popular and like clay litter, they come in several textures and scents. It is important to scoop the clumps as they happen or the “rock-like” products may discourage your cat from using the box. Again, these are convenient for us but every consideration should be made to find a product that your cat likes.

## Pearl or Crystal Litters:

Many veterinarians and behaviorists tell people to shy away from the pearl or crystal-type litters. Some cats eat them (especially kittens) and the popping and hissing sounds the litter makes when absorbing urine can frighten cats enough to stay away from the box altogether!

## Newspaper:

Unless your cat has a medical problem, do not use newspaper. Most cats do not seem to like using it.



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## Specialty Litters:

Some such products include wheat hull litters or pine litters. These products may satisfy your cat's preference for texture, but they are more expensive and are produced by small companies that make availability more difficult, especially if you happen to move to a new location where they are not available. Keeping in mind that it is best to select a product you may keep using long-term, it is better to settle on one of the more traditional brands if possible.

## LITTER BOX LINERS

Box liners are fine as long as you make sure they fit tightly and there is enough litter in the box to thoroughly cover the plastic. If not, your cat may become accustomed to eliminating on plastic and may choose other hard, slick items in the house on which to "go," such as linoleum floors or bathtubs (giant litter box – what fun!).

On the flip side, if your cat is not used to or does not like eliminating on slick surfaces (it can feel slippery and unstable to your cat) and you do not use enough litter to cover the liner, she may decide to go somewhere softer and more appealing. Options may include clothing left on the floor or bedding.

## CLEANING THE BOX

Everyone has witnessed his or her cat jumping right into the freshly cleaned litter box to eliminate. This serves as testimony that cats love clean litter boxes. What you may not know is that how you clean the litter box is just as important as when you clean.

Contrary to what seems logical, it is better to avoid strong cleaning products such as bleach or Lysol (which is a toxin to cats). Rather, use plain hot water. If you must use a cleanser, pick a gentle, natural product such as Simple Green. Even when using a gentle cleaning product, make sure you rinse the box thoroughly so the scent does not linger.

Cats do not like citrus-scented products, so avoid using cleansers with these scents.

## LITTER BOX MAINTENANCE

It is important to keep the box scooped daily and with some cats it is necessary to clean even more frequently!

Depending on the number of cats using the box, litter should be replaced often enough so as not to leave any wet litter sitting in the box from overuse.



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Replace the boxes themselves on a regular basis. If you see an accumulation of gook on the bottom it is time for a new box. New boxes are much easier to keep clean. Most boxes will need to be replaced on average every couple of years.

For your own health and safety, do not dump litter into gardens or the yard. Used litter many contain parasites that will not be killed by outside temperatures. Always dispose of litter in a trash receptacle.

Do not clean litter boxes where you prepare food! You may use your bathtubs, but be prepared to scrub down that area with a bleach solution when you are done. If you have one, a laundry tub or laundry sink is a great area for this task.

Unless you have a vested interest in paying for your plumber's next trip to Maui, flushing litter down the toilet is not a good idea. Even the "flushable" types of litter can clog older pipes, so it is best to dump the clumps in the trash.

## HOUSEHOLD CHANGES

Cats acclimate to routines and become very unsettled when changes take place. New people moving into the house or people moving out (going away to school, divorce, etc.) can upset a cat greatly.

Even something minor to you, such as rearranging furniture, can be unsettling to a cat. This does not mean you cannot do such things, just be sensitive and watch for any negative reactions.

## MOVING

Moving is very stressful for cats! Unless your cat is essentially bomb-proof, it is a good idea when you first move to a new place to restrict your cat to a single room with all her supplies, including the litter box. Remember not to place the box and the food right next to one another. Gradually increase your cat's space until she has free roam of the house. Allowing immediate access to the entire home can sometimes mean your cat will not know where to find her litter box, or if there were other cats previously in the home (especially if they ever had accidents) your cat may go where they went, rather than where you would like her to go.

## PREDICTING LITTER BOX PROBLEMS

A good way to gauge how your cat may react in new situations is to consider her behavior when new people enter your home for a visit. Does she approach calmly and confidently? Does she run away at first but come out after a bit? Does she hide the entire time people are there? If your cat tends to hide for long periods of time when people are over, there is a good chance that in a new situation she could stay hidden for so long that she might not make it to the litter box. This is a cat that should be put in a smaller area with clear access to food, water and a litter box when a new situation arises (moving house, new people moving in, etc.). If your cat is more secure with new people and situations, she is less likely to hide and have accidents in an unfamiliar circumstance.



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## PHYSICAL FACTORS

### **Roly-Poly Kitties:**

Some overweight cats have a hard time maneuvering in and out of a litter box. Solutions include a lower box and helping your cat lose some weight (please check with your vet on the best way to start a weight-loss program). Large cats may also have difficulty using a small box, so make sure that you provide an amply-sized box.

### **Geriatric and Sickly Cats:**

Older cats and cats with back/leg problems can have difficulty getting in and out of a box. Again, a lower box is recommended. You can cut the opening lower if needed or even use a baking sheet if the cat needs a very low edge.

## CONSIDERATIONS WHEN LEAVING CATS ALONE

Many people choose cats as pets because they are “low maintenance.” This often means people go away for a weekend or even a week, leave lots of food and water and hope that the cat will be okay until they get back. Quite often the cat will be fine, but there are some important what-ifs to consider.

What happens if while you are gone the cat decides its litter box has gotten too dirty to use?

What happens if the cat is in its only litter box and something frightening happens (a car backfires outside, sirens go by, etc.)?

The cat may be so frightened that it will associate the location with this negative experience.

It is best to have a friend, family member, neighbor or cat sitter check on your cat daily, clean the litter box and adhere to the regular daily feeding routine. If this is not possible, it is still very important to find someone who can come at least every few days while you are gone. This is also true since some cats may become concerned enough when left alone to not eat properly – which could mean a trip to the vet is in order. What if no one comes by to see that your cat needs medical attention?

Cats may also urinate/defecate inappropriately when you are preparing to leave for a trip. This is generally because the cat knows something is up (though not necessarily what) because routines tend to change right before a trip. The cat also may not be getting the usual amount of attention, which is concerning for the cat.

It is a good idea before you leave on your trip to invite your cat-sitter over for a couple visits with your cat. In addition to letting your cat get to know this person, it will also provide some attention and play sessions at a time when you are perhaps too busy yourself to focus on your cat.



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## OTHER CATS

If cats do not get along this can definitely affect litter box use. For instance, if one cat stalks the other, the stalked one may feel she is unable to get to the box or ambushed when she tries to use it. Know your cats and their interactions. Some may prefer being able to see what's coming when they use the box while others may prefer the security of being concealed when they go.

Cats outside your home may also have an effect on your cat's litter box habits. Sometimes just seeing cats through the window can trigger episodes as well.

Neighborhood cats urinating outside your house may also be a problem. Neighborhood cats may decide to make your front or back door part of his or her territory (yes, females can and do urine mark). This might unnerve your cat enough to do some scent marking of his or her own.

If you have an unaltered male cat, females in heat outside of your home may cause your cat to spray to mark his territory.

## WHAT TO DO?

Management! Restricting a cat's space – especially if she is nervous or is bothered by another cat – can lower the chances of accidents.

For the litter box itself, you can increase the number of boxes, try a different litter, box style or location.

You may also want to try Feliway pheromone spray to help your cat become calmer and not feel the need to scent mark.

## CONCLUSION

Any sudden new problem should always be evaluated by a vet first to make sure there are no underlying medical issues. A trip to your veterinarian should also always be the first course of action if any behavior is new, whether litter box problems, dramatic changes in appetite, activity level, sleeping patterns or distinct behavioral changes.

Lastly, it is important to assess your expectations. It is virtually a given that at some point in her life, every cat will have an incident of inappropriate elimination. This is not necessarily a daily part of living with cats, but things can be damaged, broken or soiled occasionally. Please try to keep such instances in perspective and appreciate all the wonderful things cats offer us at all other times.



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It is also important to be proactive in limiting these problems by providing your cat with all of the necessary equipment, training, management and love to insure minimal damage while keeping your relationship intact and healthy through the years