

# Evaluation of Litterbox Problems

by Donna Stewart, DVM

Originally posted to the [FanciersHealth Yahooogroup](#)

These cases can be complicated and frustrating, and frankly I cringe when they come through the door. I start with a thorough history looking for such clues as changes or disruptions in the normal routine and lifestyle of the cat and of other people and cats in the household. I focus on where the cat is urinating: is the feces outside the litter pan? is it on horizontal or vertical surfaces? is it near doors and windows? I inquire as to the appearance of the urine and the behavior of the cat: is he straining a lot? is there blood in the urine? does he have a prior history of urinary problems?

I also ask about his current diet and whether there has been a change in diet. I look for primary health reasons (other than urinary) why it might be happening, such as arthritis that makes it hard to get into a tall litter pan, increased thirst, change in appetite, change in weight, restlessness and crying. Quite often, it is a behavior problem, but I always give the cat the benefit of the doubt. If it is a geriatric cat with no history of urinary problems, I likely will do a full blood panel with a urinalysis (UA). If there are indications of cystitis or even if I still suspect a behavior problem, then I start with a UA by cystocentesis. If there is a history of bladder problems, I might add a urine culture to the UA. If there is a chronic pattern, I may immediately add radiographs.

I will focus on your cat with the information you have given me and without ever examining him. When you say that he urinates on everything, you need to be more specific. In this case (referring to a fanciershealth message thread) what you have given me is a list of your personal items and those of a new baby only. BINGO! This is important information. Secondly you have told me that this cat was once allowed free access to the out of doors and is now confined to the house. BINGO! You have said that his former pattern was to urinate just outside the litter pan. BINGO! You have said that he is geriatric. BINGO! Now I have a list of potential causes.

I am ruminating over multiple causes, but I am focusing on this cat's potential anger at you over the drastic change in his life. You have not only clipped his wings, but you have given him competition for the attention that he craves from you, especially during those long boring days with no other activity. A cat has few ways of showing displeasure just as your newborn infant. When things are wrong in an infant's life, she cries, and you do something to put her world back in order. This cat appears to me to be trying to get your attention by urinating on your things. You noticed, didn't you? Next he is urinating on the new baby's things. I think he might be telling you why he is mad at you. Sometimes a cat has additional issues and it just makes it easier to

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urinate outside the litter pan when the cat is already angry. Litter aversion often is corrected with simple, cheap, non-clumping litter. Perhaps the litter pan is in a noisy part of the apartment where the other children are bustling around. Maybe this fellow is in kidney failure also and produces more urine than he used to. He might have increased urgency to urinate.

So you need to rule out medical reasons for not using the litter pan and if they don't yield anything, focus on making his life more enjoyable. Start by putting yourself in his position. Imagine that you have moved from a large home with a view of the ocean into a studio apartment. Then one day your husband brings home another woman and announces that you are all going to live together. How would you feel and react? What would you need? Well, I think you would need some additional attention from your husband. You would need some activity that would keep you from feeling confined and stifled. You would need some mental and physical stimulation. If you expressed unhappiness, you would not need punishment. You would need reassurance.

Start by never, never yelling at the cat when he does this. The war will escalate and he will win. Treat him as "poor unhappy baby." Try to find some time in your impossibly busy day to spend with him alone focusing entirely on him. Try to talk to him and stroke him lovingly everytime during the day that you walk past him. Close the baby's door and get a monitor. As absurd as this sounds, many behaviorists recommend calling the addition "(Kitty's) new baby" when you deal with them at the same time. Maybe it just creates a shift in human thinking instead of the cat's thinking. Then introduce the baby to the cat in a manner similar to introducing a new kitten - slowly and reassuring the old resident. Can you breast feed and allow the cat to sit next to you for petting at the same time? Then he might actually look forward to the time you spend with the baby, because there is a payoff for him.

Finally do what you can to create what I call "cat space." Think vertical like a cat does. Construct some way for the cat to climb above the furniture and create high places for the cat to stay. This has the effect of increasing the size of the available space for the cat. Some people mount shelves around the room close to the ceiling. Think about creating hiding spaces for the cat such as plastic storage containers with openings cut in them. Think about creating activity situations for him like a tall post to climb to get to the shelf or a series of shelves requiring jumping, or putting the tall shelves at different heights. Create mental stimulation for him. Put out bird feeders or hummingbird feeders to attract active animals to the window. If there are squirrels or other such animals around, you might consider feeding them. Your children will enjoy it too. If your situation permits, consider building an outdoor cage where he can enjoy the outdoors without threat. I have made these using modified dog run panels and allowed access through an open window. Once I saw a cage like structure that could be built out from a window and it did not touch the ground.

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The bottom line for this cat is that if it is behavioral, then he may need to be rehomed. It is better for him to live happily with someone else than unhappily with you. It may be that the children are also feeling confined and their increased activity level in the apartment is an additional stress to the cat. That would make the outside cage, indoor hiding places, and high perches especially important. It removes him from the children's activity. Perhaps in the past he just went outside when they were rowdy.

Donna Stewart, DVM

### Other hints from Fanciershealth List members

First and foremost, a vet needs to check the cat out to make sure there is no infection or anything medically going on. If this is a urination problem, there could be an infection, UTI. If this is a defecation problem, the cat could have worms, giardia, or an allergy to a new food. If this has already been done, then just follow the next steps.

Second and also very important, do not allow the cat to have the run of your house. The cat needs to be confined to one small room like a bathroom or laundry room. The room should not have carpet.

Has there been Any changes in the cat's life style: new pet, new baby, new house, new/change of litter brand or type, additive such as deodorizer to litter, different type of litter box, person leaving home, or any other change? Cats do not like change.

The cat should have two litter boxes, one covered and one uncovered put in it's room. Make one of the litter boxes a larger box than the cat usually uses, sometimes they need additional space. Some cats do not like covered boxes because they can be cornered with no escape route. Some cats like to use one box for urination and one for defecation. You will quickly find the answers to these questions when you clean the boxes. You will know which type of box the cat prefers.

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The room should have a bed, food and water as well as favorite toys. The food should not be close to the litter box. Use only bottled or filtered water. Sometimes a change in water will cause a problem.

The boxes need to be scooped or dumped twice a day, morning and night, so that the cat does not have an issue with whether the boxes are clean. If you find that scooping does not work, use only a small amount of litter and dump it daily. You can use the cheapest clay litter if this happens.

After a week if the cat is using the litter box, let the cat out while you are home. Let the cat out for only a few short hours a day as long as the cat continues to use the litter box. The cat should spend the night or any alone time in it's room.

After a week of this, let the cat out permanently as long as the cat uses the litter box.

If the cat should have an accident, it needs to be cleaned up immediately and thoroughly. If the accident is on carpet, an enzyme cleaner needs to be used so that the smell is totally destroyed. Simple Solution by Brampton or Nature's Miracle are good cleaners and deodorizers. Carpet pad may need to be pulled out.

There is also a product called Feliway that is guaranteed to work. It is used on the area where the accident occurred. Feliway also has a plug in for electric outlets.

Thoroughly clean the litter boxes at least once a week. Do not use bleach unless you rinse all the bleach out and let the box dry in the sun. Bleach and urine make gas and also create ammonia. Bleach will cause a cat to stop using the litter box.

Please save this information should you need it or to pass along to anyone who's at their "wits end" with litterbox problems. Soiling "outside the box" is the #1 reasons cats are abandoned or put down so this information could save a cat's life!

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Last week I attended a lecture by Dr. Andrea Tasi of Kingstowne Cat Clinic on "Litterbox Blues" and learned some very useful information. You can print out more information about preventing Litterbox Blues at: <http://www.preciouscat.com/WebPages/litterBoxSolutions.html>

**RULE OUT MEDICAL CAUSES FIRST:** Dr. Tasi said that over the course of her practice she has found that medical problems are the #1 reason cats stop using the box. So she encourages cat people to always rule that out first. (I had urine withdrawn externally with a needle from my 14-year-old cat last month. It really wasn't that bad and was over in about 3 seconds; the cost was under \$30 and was well-worth doing.) Cats are "associative beings." That means that if they associate the cat box, or type of litter, with painful urination or defecation, even after curing the infection, they will "still associate" pain with the litterbox. Therefore, in order to break the "associative disorder" its advised to buy a NEW box and perhaps a new litter type, and go from there. **REMEMBER:** Cats aren't trying to get back at you by soiling, they are doing it for perfectly logical reasons -- you need to think like a cat in order to change your cat's behavior. Never, ever punish your cat as you will not change the behavior, but only make your cat fear you.

**USE SANDY TEXTURES:** As we all know, cats originated as desert animals and, as such, they truly prefer SOFT, sandy textures. Dr. Tasi said AVOID the new crystal products, and coarse litters, as they are painful to the tender pads of many cats, and "just don't feel right." Dr. Tasi generally recommends clumping litters, except for kittens under 4 weeks, who can inhale or ingest the clumping substance and develop health problems, sometimes fatal. She especially likes a product called "Dr. Elsey's (unscented) Precious Cat Litter." Dr. Elsey also makes another product called "Cat Attract" that attracts them to the box. You can take a look at his products at: [www.preciouscats.com](http://www.preciouscats.com), or call toll free at: 877-311 CATS (2287). If you want a clay free litter product, try "World's Best" which is made with corn. Dr. Tasia recommends filling the box 2-3" with litter.

**TAKE THE HOOD OFF & DUMP THE SCENTED LITTERS:** She said that cats NEVER go into dark, enclosed spaces to eliminate because that puts them in a very vulnerable position. So if a cat is avoiding a hooded box, take the hood off or don't use one in the first place! It is another "turn off" to cats and will often make them go elsewhere. Dr. Tasi said that our cats' noses are 1000% more sensitive than ours and hoods trap the odors and dust. Also, "out of sight, out of mind," may make us forget to scoop the box as often as we should (at least twice a day). Would you want to go to the bathroom in a dirty toilet? Your cat doesn't either! Cats also find the smells of roses and cheap perfumes in the litter repulsive, so always choose unscented litter. Try mixing about 1/2 cup baking soda into the box if odor is a problem to your nostrils.

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**TRY A DIFFERENT SIZED BOX:** Especially for those overweight cats, or cats whose urine sprays outside the box; go to Home Depot, Walmart, etc and buy a BIG Rubbermaid or plastic storage box. If s/he's a sprayer, get one that's very high and cut out an oval entrance in front. If s/he has arthritis, put a little ramp up to the entrance. If they kick litter all over the place, buy one of those large plastic washing machine liners and put your box(es) into it. It's much cheaper to buy these items at a department store than from a pet store. **BEST, CHEAPEST SCOOPER:** Best scoopers are flat metal utensils with little holes or slits -- I've found the best ones at the dollar store!

**LOCATION OF BOX:** Please put a box on EACH LEVEL of your house in a quiet, out of the way location, that's not next to a heater, washing machine or appliance that could suddenly start up and frighten your cat. Be mindful of older cats who may suffer from arthritis and bladder problems and might find a long trip to the basement painful and difficult (put a ramp or phone book in front of the box entrance to help them step up). Though cats see better than us in low light, **CATS CAN'T SEE IN THE DARK**, so please don't put their box in a pitch dark basement. Also, the general rule of thumb is to have one box for each cat and put each box in a different location so they aren't competing for the box. And don't place them next to their food or water. Would you want to eat next to your toilet?

**CLEANING THE BOX DOESN'T JUST MEAN SCOOPING OUT THE POOP!:** Again, back to that 1000% nose, look at the box itself next time you clean it. After scrubbing it with soap and water and perhaps a bit of bleach, rinse it out thoroughly. You may want to place it in the sun to dry as sunshine is a natural disinfectant. Then put your nose into the box and take a deep sniff. If there's a lingering odor or it's covered in scratches and discoloration, throw it out and buy a nice new one at Walmart or Home Depot.

**CLEANING STAINS & ODORS OUTSIDE THE BOX:** You've got to use an enzymatic cleaner to get rid of those stains and odors. Remember your cat's 1000% nose will bring him back to previous elimination spots and s/he will pee/poop there again. There's some great products available, including "Simple Solution" Stain & Odor Remover. Dr. Tasi's favorite product is "Anti-Icky-Poo" in Veterinary Practice Strength (she doesn't like it in "regular" strength) . Check your vet's office for it or order online at: <http://www.mistermax.com/products.html> Dr. Tasi said you must first SATURATE the spot with solution and KEEP IT WET for 24 hours, covering it with plastic & spraying it several times. Remember that the urine soaked in deeply and then spread horizontally throughout the fibers, so you must get the product deeply into whatever is stained or smells. **DO NOT USE ANYTHING THAT IS AMMONIA-BASED**, because of its "urine-like" scent to a cat.

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OTHER TIPS: Dr. Tasi also recommends another product called ["Feliway."](#) This smells like friendly pheromones to a cat and when sprayed in a cat's environment, it creates a comforting, reassuring feeling that reduces the impulse to urine mark or scratch. (A cat's pheromones are between his eye and ear; when s/he rubs his head against you, s/he's putting friendly pheromones on you.)

PLAY WITH YOUR CAT - STRESS CAN CAUSE ELIMINATION PROBLEMS: Dr. Tasi says that many elimination problems stem from boredom. Cats are designed to be hunters and become incredibly bored and frustrated when they are denied the opportunity. She says to spend at least 15 minutes each day playing with your cat. Toys like "da bird" are excellent (ask for it at your local pet store); anything interactive that makes your cat run and chase. Dr. Tasi says laser toys are OK -- NEVER shine in your cat's eyes -- but can frustrate the cat as they are never able to catch anything. Be sure your cat has plenty of toys to stalk and chase. [Here's a great site for toys](#)

. You might also want to consider acquiring another cat or two so your pet has somebody to play with. CAUTION: Do not leave string toys lying around as your cat can choke to death on string or it can end up wrapped around his internal organs and intestines.

WONDERFUL FINAL TIP FOR ACQUIRING A NEW CAT: Apart from "Introducing a Cat to a New Home" instructions which are another topic in itself, I learned this simple new tip: While keeping the cats separated in different rooms, try wiping each cat's fur with a separate towel daily. Then place each cat's food dish on top of the other cat's towel. They will associate each other's scent with the positive experience of being fed, and grow tolerant of each other quick!: