

# Appendix 11

## House-training Your Cat or Kitten

Kittens learn to use a litter tray from observation of their mother's behaviour, so that by the time they reach their new homes most kittens are already house-trained and, as long as they are provided with a suitable litter tray and litter substrate, no further house-training is required.

But occasionally a cat or kitten may use some other area of the house as a toilet. The most common reasons for this are described below.

### Insufficient Number of Litter Trays

Cats often prefer one area to urinate and a separate area to defecate. They can also be reluctant to share a litter tray with other cats. For these reasons the recommended number of litter trays to provide is at least two for a single cat and one per cat plus one extra in a multi-cat household.

### The Location of the Litter Trays

For a cat or kitten that is new to the house, it is important that the litter trays are easily accessible and easy to find. Providing separate litter trays also means providing them in separate locations. If they are placed side-by-side the cat(s) may regard this as a single litter location and still eliminate elsewhere.

Cats can also be reluctant to use a litter tray that is positioned:

- **Near food or water.** Most cats do not like to urinate or defecate close to where they eat or drink.
- **Near windows or glass doors.** A cat can feel vulnerable when he uses a litter tray and feel particularly at threat if he thinks that he may be seen by neighbouring cats.
- **Near the cat flap or other entrances and exits.** Where the cat enters or exits the house can also be viewed as a potential entry point for rivals from outside. Therefore, this is not a place where a cat is likely to feel comfortable using a toilet.
- **Near to other potential threats or disturbances:** for example, in a walkway, by the dog's bed, by a cupboard that is frequently opened, where children play, near the washing machine or other noisy household appliances, or in any area where the cat has had a frightening or painful experience. If a cat feels worried about using a tray in an 'exposed' position he may prefer to use a quieter 'hideaway' such as behind a chair, under a table or in a quiet corner.

If your cat is choosing to urinate or defecate somewhere other than where you have placed the litter trays, he may be telling you that this is his preferred location.

Therefore, placing a litter tray where he is choosing to eliminate may encourage him to use it. If the cat does then use the litter tray but it is not an ideal location for you, it can be very gradually (a few inches a day) moved to a more appropriate place.

## The Size and Shape of the Litter Tray

- A litter tray should be big enough to allow the cat to turn around without any part of his body, including his tail, touching the sides, and deep enough to contain a sufficient depth of litter, 5–10cm (2–4 inches), depending on the size of the cat. However, consideration should be made for kittens, small or elderly cats who may have difficulty getting in and out of a litter tray that is too big or too high-sided.
- An elderly cat with arthritis or a cat with any condition that might cause difficulty with movement may benefit from being provided with a litter tray that has one side cut away to allow easy access. A potting tray or garden tidy with a high back and low front can also be used.

## Covered vs Uncovered Litter Tray?

Whether the litter tray is covered or uncovered can be a matter of individual preference and the cat's previous experience. Some cats feel more secure using a covered tray, whereas others refuse to use them. There are a few points to be aware of if providing a covered litter tray:

- **Keep it clean.** Because a covered tray blocks the sight and smell from us, it is easy to be unaware that the tray needs cleaning. But keeping a covered tray clean and fresh is especially important because the trapped odours can soon become too strong for the cat and deter him from using it.
- **Is it big enough?** Because cats do not like to have any part of their body touching the sides of the tray while they use it, most will not like to use a covered tray that is too small. For cats with arthritis or similar conditions, this can be especially uncomfortable for them.
- **Watch out for ambushing.** When a cat is exiting a covered litter tray this can provide an opportunity for a rival housemate to ambush and 'attack'. If this is happening it can soon deter the victim from using the covered tray.

## The 'Wrong' Type of Litter Substrate

The litter substrate is what the cat digs into to deposit its waste. What the cat will use can also be a matter of individual preference and previous experience.

- **Novel or inconsistent litter substrate:** A cat may not want to use a litter substrate that is different in texture or scent to one it is accustomed to.
- **Unclean:** Some cats can be more fastidious than others, but a dirty litter tray can deter many cats from using it. The best policy is to clean out any faeces and/or wet patches at least once or twice daily and wash the tray completely once or twice a week.
- **Scented:** Cats have a very sensitive sense of smell and scents that seem attractive to us can often be overpowering for a cat. Using a scented cat litter or one that releases

a scent when it is wet can be highly repellent for cats, especially in a covered tray that traps the odour. The same applies to scented tray liners, air freshening sprays or other scented products or devices used close to the litter tray.

- **Too shallow:** Most cats like to dig a reasonable-sized hole in which to urinate or defecate. They can't do this if an insufficient depth of litter is provided.
- **Uncomfortable:** The litter needs to be easy to dig into and to walk on. This is especially important for an elderly or injured cat who may find walking on and trying to dig into pelleted litter or similar difficult or uncomfortable.
- The use of plastic tray liners can also deter a cat from using the tray because while attempting to dig, the cat's claws can get snagged in the liner.

## Using an 'Outdoor' Toilet

If your cat is allowed access outside you might prefer him to eliminate outside rather than in the house. It can often be best to give the cat the option of using an indoor or an outdoor toilet.

### Encouraging your cat or kitten to eliminate outside

- Your kitten or cat will have learnt to eliminate on cat litter so you may need to help your cat to make the change from litter to soil. You can do this by mixing a little soil from outside into the litter tray, gradually adding just a little at a time.
- At the same time choose an area of your land that you would prefer your cat to use and empty a little of the soiled litter over that area so that you transfer the scent to outside. Cats are more likely to use an area away from the house where they feel partially hidden, so the best place may be amongst bushes, but don't be surprised if your cat chooses a different location.
- Your cat might be reluctant to go to the toilet outside if he feels vulnerable, and to a kitten the big outdoors can seem a daunting place, so until he feels confident about going outdoors he may be happier using a litter tray indoors occasionally for a little while longer. So don't be tempted to remove indoor litter trays until you are sure that he is completely at ease about going outside. If you take the tray away too soon you may find that he has found another, not so suitable, place to use as an indoor toilet!
- Never get rid of the litter trays completely as you will need them for times when your cat needs to be confined indoors e.g. whenever there might be fireworks outside, or if your cat is unwell.
- Providing a purpose-built outdoor latrine can also help to encourage your cat to eliminate outside. It can also be easier for you to keep clean and can reduce the risk of other areas of your garden being used as a cat toilet.
  - The best location is usually at the edge of the garden, surrounded by bushes, somewhere that the cat can access easily but provides some privacy.
  - Dig a hole that is slightly larger in diameter than an average litter tray, approximately 45–60cm deep, and line with plastic.
  - Fill a third with pea gravel and top up with playground sand.
  - Remove soiled patches frequently (once a day) and top up with fresh sand as necessary.

## House-training ‘Accidents’

If your cat does urinate or defecate in the house away from the litter tray, it is important to deal with this correctly.

**Do not attempt to punish the cat.** Attempting to punish your cat after the event is pointless because he will not be able to make the association between your ‘correction’ and the act of eliminating. Catching the cat ‘in the act’ can also be counter-productive because the cat is more likely to associate your presence when eliminating as the thing to avoid, which can result in the cat finding a quiet corner well away from you to use as a toilet rather than use the litter tray if you are nearby.

**Clean the area:** Cats may re-use areas that they have previously used as a toilet and can be drawn back to the location by the residual scent of urine or faeces.

- Wash the area initially with plenty of warm water.
- Test a small area first and then wash with a 10–20% solution of biological detergent or a proprietary enzymatic ‘odour elimination’ product (avoid using bleach or products containing bleach).
- Rinse, pat dry.
- Wipe or spray over with surgical spirit (again test an area first).

Unfortunately, because urine can soak into carpets, rugs, other porous surfaces and soft furnishings, cleaning sufficiently is not always possible, and it can sometimes be necessary to remove heavily soiled items or floor coverings, and deny the cat access to the area until it can be cleaned thoroughly. If it is a carpet that needs to be taken up, remove any underlay as well, clean the floor underneath thoroughly, as described above, and then leave the area uncovered for at least a week to allow it to ‘air’. When replacing flooring it is often best to choose a new floor covering that has a very different texture to the previous one because the cat might have developed a preference for toileting on the previous covering and materials of a similar texture.

## If the Problem Persists

If all the points mentioned above have been addressed and your cat continues to urinate or defecate in inappropriate places, it is then necessary to seek professional help.

House-training problems can often be linked to underlying health issues so it is important to get your cat checked by your vet. If your vet can find no medical problem or any relevant health issues have been treated but the house-training problem persists, then ask your vet if he is able to refer you to a qualified behaviourist with suitable knowledge and experience of feline behaviour.

## House-Training Problem or Scent-Marking?

Cats may also deposit urine around the house as a way of scent-marking. The main difference between a cat that is urinating to relieve itself and one that is using urine to

scent-mark (a behaviour known as ‘spraying’) is the position that the cat adopts. A cat that is relieving itself will squat down on its hind quarters and hold its tail horizontally out behind it. Whereas a spraying cat squirts urine backwards whilst standing, often on tiptoes and with the tail raised vertically. Urine spraying is a normal part of feline communication but when it occurs indoors, not only is it unpleasant and unacceptable for us, if the cat is neutered it can also be a sign that he is stressed and insecure. If this is the case with your cat, it is important to see your vet to rule out any underlying medical reasons for the behaviour, and address possible stress issues that might need the help of a qualified and experienced behaviourist.

© Trudi Atkinson.

This appendix is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)