

Litter Box Training

By Michelle Posage, DVM



Winter is here and spring is a while off, but I am already thinking about the number of cat owners that will call me for advice when the warm weather returns and litter box problems begin.

Indeed, there seems to be a seasonality to feline inappropriate elimination problems, but unfortunately some cat owners struggle with this concern year-round due to a variety of causes. One cause to consider is the litter box.

I don't think I am projecting my personal preferences too much when I say that cats, like humans, have certain toileting preferences. I, myself, appreciate a private, clean, peaceful bathroom. With two young boys at home, this can sometimes be a challenge, but I make the best of it.

Cats are not much different. Besides wanting some sort of softish absorbable place deposit their waste (usually kitty litter); cats want a fresh, unsoiled, peaceful space to use. Fortunately they will often relax their standards, like me, at least for a while.

We humans spend quite a bit of time and money on remodeling our bathrooms to be bigger and brighter, yet our cats rarely have the opportunity to select their own toilet or even the placement of it. I say "rarely" because when a cat urinates on your carpet, they are actually exercising their options, just not in a very agreeable way.

So, what type of litter box would your cat tell you to buy if they had the chance? Well, cats are individuals with their own likes and dislikes, but generally speaking, they want big, open boxes.

Cats these days do not trend on the skinny side. While the average cat should weigh between 9 and 10 pounds, many of the cats I see professionally are 12 to 15 pounds and perhaps more. At the same time, litter boxes seem to have gotten smaller. It is not unusual for a client to tell me that they bought the biggest litter box at the pet store, yet their poor oversized cat is unable to comfortably move around in it or even keep their rear end within the boundaries of the box.

This is when it is time to get creative. A large litter box may be hard to find; but shallow, plastic, under-the-bed storage bins are plentiful at any home supply store. In fact, you probably already have one in your house--storing sweaters or wrapping paper. This is the perfect box for a large cat as it would be for a multi-cat household where it can be difficult to follow the recommended "one box per cat plus one" rule.

Having an open, uncovered box is far preferable to a lidded version. Initially, it would seem that that a covered box gives your cat some privacy, and it does...but at a price. While your cat may enjoy the seclusion, these boxes are often confining and pungent. Think of an airplane lavatory or outdoor outhouse and you'll get the picture. Private? Sometimes. Pleasant? Definitely not. It is no wonder some cats start peeing behind the couch.

Covered boxes have yet another troublesome aspect of entrapping cats. The single opening in the box means that it is easy for a meek cat to be held captive inside as your dog, young child, or bully cat hovers at the entrance.

So next time you scoop out your cat's litter box (which should be at least daily), think about what else you can do for the sake of preventing problems and making your cat happier. It could be time for a kitty bathroom makeover.

Dr. Michelle Posage is a veterinary behaviorist at the Animal Medical Center of New England, a specialty and emergency animal hospital. For more information or to schedule a personal consultation with Dr. Posage call 603.821.7222 or go to www.amcne.com.