

The Scoop!

Everything You Need to Know About Litter Boxes

The great thing about cats is that, unlike dogs, housetraining usually comes to them instinctively. The other great (although sometimes frustrating) thing about cats is that they tend to be just as particular about their litter box as they are about everything else. Fortunately, we've got the low-down on all things litter box: what to buy, where to put it, and how to make sure it works for both you and your new cat.

First Things First

Choosing the appropriate box (or boxes) and litter is the first step in getting your home ready for a feline occupant. We'll start off with the box.

When you find yourself staring at the shelves full of different litter boxes in confusion, think first about the size of your cat. Is she only a couple of months old? Is she a teenager? Is she an adult? It is important to pick a litter box that's big enough for your cat to get into comfortably and move around. If the box is too small, your cat is likely to balance on the edges or just refuse to use it in order to avoid stepping or sitting in soiled litter while she goes. Honestly, can you really blame her? If you've adopted a tiny kitten, try to find a box that has relatively low edges. If it's too difficult for her to climb into the box, she may resort to other options: soft furniture or your houseplants, for example.

Your cat's personality will also make a difference in what kind of box you select. Some cats insist on privacy and prefer a covered litter box; some cats feel confined in a covered box and prefer a simple, open pan. It's hard to know what your cat will prefer, though, until you get her settled in at home, so it is generally a good idea to provide her with both a covered and an uncovered box until you know a little more about her habits.

How many boxes you set up for your cat is also an important factor. As a general rule, you should have at least as many boxes in your home as you have cats, which makes sense if you think about it. You don't want one cat being able to prevent another from using the litter box, or have a pile-up if more than one cat needs to use the litter box at the same time. And then there are some cats who just never learned to share, and want a litter box all of their own. Even if you only have one cat, it's a good idea to have one litter box for each story of your home; you'll cut back on accidents if your cat doesn't have to go too far to get to the litter box from wherever she happens to be when nature calls.

When choosing a litter box, consider size, privacy, and accessibility.

Changing litters can be tricky, so be sure to do it very slowly.

All Litters Are *Not* Created Equal

Choosing a litter for your cat is just as important as choosing a litter box for your cat. These days there are tons of choices, and everybody has their own bright-colored attractive packaging promising wonderful results. Which one's the right one?

The first thing you want to consider is what kind of litter your cat is accustomed to using. Most of the time, a cat will be used to using a clay-based litter (the ones that look like tiny gray rocks), either clumping or regular. If you're not sure, ask the people you're adopting from; they should be able to tell you what she's used to. Whatever she's used to is what you want to start her off on when you take her home. There's no sense in putting her through the confusion and stress of a move, and expecting her to figure out unfamiliar litter, too.

Making a change may be just as important as keeping her comfortable, however. Clay litters are made from silica, a glass-like substance that produces an extremely fine powder. Most cat owners are familiar with the cloud of dust that billows up from clay litter when it's poured into a litter box; what most people *don't* know is that silica dust is toxic when inhaled, both for your new kitty and for you, the litter box changer.

Fortunately, as people better understand the problems with clay litter, more and more healthy alternatives are popping up! Walk down the aisles of a pet supply store these days, and you'll find litter made from old recycled newspaper, wheat, pine sawdust, and everything in between. Isn't it nice to have options? Not only are these litters healthier for your family and your new pet, because they're used slightly differently from traditional clay litter you end up using less of them: less dumping, less work, and less money out of your pocket. And some, like the pine-based litters, are even septic and sewer safe! Just scoop and flush, and the job is done.

As with any change, you want to break a change in litter to your cat slowly. Start out with a layer of the new litter on the bottom of her litter box, covered in a layer of the litter she's used to. Over the course of a couple of weeks, gradually increase the amount of her new litter and decrease the amount of the old; before she knows it, she'll be using her new litter like nothing's changed at all!

Unfortunately, there are some cats out there that just can't deal with change. If your cat absolutely refuses to use a non-clay litter, despite all of your best efforts to make the switch, there are still some ups and downs among your clay litter choices. Although it might make your life a little easier, clumping clay litter should be avoided. When your cat takes a bath, she can't avoid licking up bits of litter, and if you're using clumping litter it will do exactly what it's supposed to do: it will clump in her digestive system. Especially with small kittens, for whom even a tiny amount of litter can block digestion, clumping litter poses a serious threat. The other thing to look out for is scented or perfumed litter. It might smell better to you, but your cat depends heavily on his sense of smell to figure out where he's supposed to go; if he doesn't like what he's smelling, or doesn't recognize it as his bathroom, you'll end up with a lot of little messes in a hurry.

Where's the Bathroom?

A litter box shouldn't just go wherever you've got a little space; once again, keep in mind that cats are just as picky as people, and they know what they like (and what they don't). You will probably be tempted to tuck the litter box or boxes away in out-of-the-way places where you won't constantly be smelling them, but remember: you wouldn't want to sit next to the water heater in a cold, concrete-floored basement every time you have to go to the bathroom, and neither does she.

Again, your cat's age and size is important. Is your kitten too small to navigate long flights of stairs? Is your older cat too arthritic to manage them? Young or old, are they capable of "holding it" long enough to get to a box that's placed in some distant corner of the house? Ideally, the litter box should be away from the cat's food and water bowls, in a place that she frequents, but which also allows her some privacy. Many people place them in bathrooms or closets; just be sure that the door is always propped open, so she can't get locked out or locked in. Avoid any place where your cat might be startled while she's in the box; if the sound of an appliance kicking on or some other event scares her out of it once, she may never be willing to go back. Additionally, avoid concrete floors. Some cats like to scratch the area surrounding the litter box, and if

she finds the floor surface unappealing she may be inclined to find a more suitable surface to use for a bathroom.

*Remember:
you wouldn't
want to use
the bathroom
wedged next
to the water
heater in a
cold, dark
basement,
and neither
does your cat!*

Keeping it Clean

Different litters frequently mean different cleaning habits: some you scoop, some you dump, some you flush. But regardless of the litter you use, it is absolutely critical that the litter box be kept clean. Feces should be scooped out of the box at least once a day; you may find that your cat requires more frequent cleaning, so observe her behavior carefully. How often the box needs a full change of litter depends mostly on the litter, but as a general

rule if it ever looks like most of the litter has been damp or is clumped, it's time for a change. Once a week is a good starting place. Washing the litter box is important as well, especially if your cat dislikes or destroys box liners, so when you go to change out her litter box, give it a rub down with soap and water. Avoid strong-smelling or potentially toxic cleaners; like perfumed litters, strong smelling detergents can deter your cat from using the litter box, and toxins are naturally a no-no.

*Kittens need
routine!
Place your
kitten in her
litter box after
meals and
after naps,
when she most
needs to go.*

Introducing Your Cat to the Litter Box

Housetraining comes naturally to cats, so half of the work is already done! But she's not going to figure everything out on her own, so you need to spend a little time showing her how things work in her new home.

When you first bring your new cat home, don't give her free roam of the house. The best thing to do is confine her to the area where her litter box will be located for a few hours, and stay with her if at all possible. Show her where the litter box is right away; let her get a good look at it and sniff around it. If you're using the same litter that she's used to, it should be clear skies and smooth sailing, but stay with her until nature calls. If she doesn't go straight to the box for whatever reason, gently pick her up and place her in the box and allow her to finish. Never, ever yell at your cat, or rub her nose in it if she has an accident! If you haven't caught her in the act, she will have no idea what you're yelling at her for and all you'll accomplish is teaching her to fear you, or worse, to fear her litter box. If

*If your cat is
having a lot
of accidents,
she may be
sick. Don't
wait: get her
to the vet!*

she develops an association between punishment and her litter box, it will take a lot of time and hard work to get her to use the box again. When she does use the box, give her plenty of praise. Keeping her happy around the box will save you a lot of trouble in the long run!

When you do release your new cat to roam at large through the house, be sure to remind her occasionally for the first couple of days where the litter box is. She may pick it up right away and never have an accident, but it doesn't hurt to keep your bases covered. About an hour after she eats, pick her up and gently remind her where the litter box is located by placing her near it.

If you have adopted a brand new baby kitten with no experience using a litter box, you'll need to take a little extra time to make sure she gets the picture. Remember, in nature her mom would teach her all of these things, and as her adopter you're accepting all the responsibilities of a mommy cat! When you first bring her home, sit with her near the litter box. Watch her behavior: when she needs to go, she'll start making digging motions with her front paws. Pick her up and gently place her in the litter box. If she has trouble figuring things out, very gently take one of her front paws and help her make her digging motions in the litter; after that, instinct should take over! With young kittens, it's important to establish a routine so that they know when they should be headed for the box. A little while after a meal, set her gently near the box. Do the same after a nap. These are the two times when a kitten is most likely to need to use the litter box.

Dealing with Accidents

Always remember this: everybody has accidents. Your kitten or cat is no different. If your cat begins urinating outside of the litter box, there is always a reason, and the first thing you should do is take her to the vet. The most common reason a cat will stop using the litter box is that she is in pain and incontinent because of a urinary tract infection (UTI). Fortunately, UTI's are easy to diagnose and easy to treat, and as soon as your kitty's feeling better she'll go right back to her usual litter box habits.

Dealing with a behavior problem can be a lot trickier than dealing with a urinary tract infection. Think about when the accidents started: had you moved recently? Added a new pet or person to your life? Rearranged your cat's living space? Spent an unusual amount of time away from home? Any of these things can really stress out your cat, and she may be letting you know how she feels. There are many and varied methods you can employ to correct behavior problems; talk to your vet about which options are the best for your cat and your situation.

Just remember: if you don't catch her in the act, it's too late to punish her. If you try to take retroactive action, she will not know what it is you're punishing her for, and all you'll accomplish is to make her fear you, or worse, fear her litter box permanently.

If you *do* happen to catch her in the act, startle her: slap the wall, bang a pan, or give her a squirt with a water gun. The important thing to remember is that you want to get her to stop what she's doing, but you don't want her to associate the sound or distraction with you. If she knows she'll only get startled when you're around, she may continue her bad habits whenever you're not at home...and by the time you get home and discover the accident, it's way too late to let her know what she's done wrong.

Sum it up!

When choosing a box, look for:

- Size: your cat needs to be able to move around, but also has to be big enough to get over the rim
- Variety: until you know what your cat likes, let her choose – covered, uncovered, lined, unlined

When choosing a litter, look for:

- Something familiar, for starters...she's already going through enough change for now.
- Something healthy, when she's settled in! There are many, many healthy alternatives to clay litter, peruse them and choose one that works for you!

When placing a box, consider:

- Privacy: how much does your cat need?
- Comfort and safety: you never want the box somewhere the cat may get startled or frightened while she's using it, or somewhere she just plain doesn't want to be.
- Common sense: don't put it near her food! Nobody wants to poop where they eat!

And remember: everybody has accidents. Be aware of your cat's behavior and know what's normal and what needs veterinary attention!

