

LITTER BOX TRAINING YOUR CAT

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THE LITTER BOX

If you're taking home a new kitten who has captured your heart, you will certainly need one important accessory — a litter box. Hmm, the mysterious litter box — knowing which one to get and what to do with it does not come naturally to the average pet owner. Here's what you need to know.

HOW MANY?

You should always have one more litter box than you have cats. That is, one cat gets two litter boxes. Two cats get three. If you have a two-story home keep one litter box on each floor.

HOW BIG?

The litter box should be roomy enough for your cat to turn around in it. Forget about trying to get a small litter box to minimize the unsightliness. You have a cat. Your friends will have to understand. If the box is too small, your cat simply won't use it and will eliminate elsewhere. But if the litter box is too big, you may also have a problem, especially if you have a very small kitten. Don't buy a huge box and expect your kitten to scale it every time she has to "go to the bathroom." Buy a smallish litter box for your kitten and invest in a larger one as she grows.

TO COVER OR NOT TO COVER

That is the question. There are covered litter boxes as well as open ones. If you use a covered box, make sure your cat can get in and out easily. The best types of covered box also have overlapping seams so that sprayed urine will not leak out. Remember, though, that many cats hate being enclosed when they are at their most vulnerable. They often like to see who's coming and going, in case they need to beat a hasty retreat. And cats really don't like surprises so if their boxes are covered they may not use them.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

A cardinal rule of cat ownership is to never put your cat's litter box next to her food bowl or bed. Cats do not like to eliminate where they eat or have their nest. If you place a litter box too close to a cat's nest, she may well pick a more comfortable spot, such as behind the couch, far away from her resting and dining area.

Put the litter box in a quiet low-traffic area, such as in a spare bathroom. A corner location is better than out in the open because a cat needs to feel secure. If your cat has only got two directions to watch instead of four — and feels she has an escape route — she'll be more relaxed. Additionally, some cats are nervous and don't like things too close to them. Even a hanging plant that blows in the breeze or casts shadows can prompt your cat to search for a different location.

If you have more than one cat, remember that cats are territorial and hierarchical. So, put their boxes far enough apart to be sure that territorial issues don't come into play if one invades the other's space.

WHAT KIND OF LITTER?

Cats, by nature, dig and scratch in soft soil out of doors, often burying their waste. The litter you provide substitutes for the dirt outside. The big question is: What is the best material to use? There are a number of litter materials to choose from, including clay-type litters and those made from plant materials. Some cats will refuse to eliminate on certain substrates while others prefer different materials for urination and defecation. It's all a matter of taste — both yours and your cat's. Does your cat prefer fine sand or chunky pellets? Do you prefer clumping or non-clumping litter? Do you prefer a litter that's ecologically friendly? Is tracking or odor control your most important concern? Either way, there's probably a litter to suit.

Clay is a good absorbent of moisture and odor and a reasonable substitute for fresh soil from the yard. Large granular clay, though economical and absorbent, is often dusty and tracks about the house. Small granular "clumping" litters (also made of clay) have become popular recently due to their excellent absorbency, clumping properties - which lead to the formation of firm balls when moistened - and their ease of disposal. These litters also make litter boxes easier to keep clean.

Environmentally friendly litters are often made of recycled waste products, such as newspaper. They can also be made of biodegradable material, including wheat, corn and wood chips that break down easily in landfills. Some of these litters have the consistency of fine sand while others come in pelleted form. But how do you choose? You may not like the dust of fine litter and your cat may not like the extra work of covering stool with, what amounts to, small rocks. Some choices can be tough.

Silica gel litters have become increasingly popular. These clear plastic beads are neat to look at and absorb odor well. When your cat urinates in the box adorned with these litters you can actually hear a snap, crackle and pop as the beads soak up the liquid. This litter is good for extended periods, about 3 to 4 weeks in most instances. But remember, the litter can only hold so much moisture and must be changed eventually. Also, the beads have a tendency to bounce around the room once they are knocked out of the box.

Once you find a litter your cat likes, stick with it. Don't buy whatever is on sale this week. Cats are very particular and litter changes can lead to unwelcome modifications in bathroom habits.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I CHANGE LITTER?

Try to remove feces and moistened litter daily. Regular scooping will keep the box from becoming an odor source for your home and maintain it as an attractive place for your cat. Depending on the buildup of soiled litter and odors, completely clean out the box and replenish it with fresh litter every so often. When changing the litter, you should wash the box with warm, soapy water, but remember to rinse it thoroughly before refilling it with litter. And never, clean the box with harsh chemicals, as doing so will likely cause your cat to turn his nose up at what will be perceived as an olfactorily repugnant offering.