

# Litter Box Training for Your Kitten

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As you get ready to bring a cat or kitten into your home, make sure you have all the things you will need to make your new pet feel welcome. Besides providing high-quality food, a safe environment, proper veterinary care, and lots of love, it is also important to give some thought to your cat's litter box. While this may not seem like a very important subject at first, the litter box can quickly become the major focus of your attention should your cat decide to stop using it. Elimination disorders are one of the biggest reasons for cats to be given up to shelters, and one of the most common problems for which people seek veterinary advice.



While it's true that most cats will instinctively use a litter box from the time they are young kittens, some basic knowledge about cats and litter boxes can help prevent problems from starting in the first place. And, as we all know, it's much easier to prevent a problem than to deal with it after it's started! Here are some important points to keep in mind:

## New kittens

Cats have a natural instinct to eliminate in sand or soil, and kittens also learn from observing their mother. Kittens usually start learning to use the litter box at 3 or 4 weeks of age, so by the time you bring your kitten home, she will likely be used to using a litter box.

You will not need to train your kitten to use the litter box in the same way that you would housebreak a puppy. However, it is important to make sure your kitten knows the location of the litter box in her new surroundings. Make sure the box is not in a noisy or hard-to-reach place. Soon after you bring your kitten home, take her to the litter box at a quiet time. Place her into the litter box, gently take her front paws and show her how to scratch at the litter once or twice. Don't worry if she jumps right out again. Place her in the box at the times throughout the day when a cat would normally go to the bathroom: first thing in the morning, and after meals, playing, and waking up from a nap. Remember that cats prefer privacy when using the litter box, so once you see that she is using the box, leave her alone.

Most cats will make the adjustment to a new litter box without any problems. However, if there are any accidents, don't scold or punish your cat. Yelling or using a squirt bottle will only confuse and scare your cat, and she won't understand why you are upset. Instead, clean up the accident with an enzyme cleaner to remove stains and odor. Then go back to square one, placing the kitten in the litter box frequently until she starts using it. If the accidents continue, or if you are noticing any diarrhea or straining, have your kitten examined by your veterinarian to rule out any possible medical problems. Cats with [urinary tract disease](#) or [intestinal parasites](#) may stop using the litter box.

## Number of boxes

The rule of thumb here is that you should provide one litter box per cat, plus one extra. While this may seem excessive to us, cats are very fastidious and some cats will not use a litter box that other cats have used. Some cats also prefer to use one box to urinate in and another to defecate in. If your house has several levels, make sure there are litter boxes on every floor.

## Location

Cats prefer to use the litter box in a quiet, private place where they feel safe. Loud noises (buzzers on washers and dryers, etc), people walking in and out, or being startled by a dog or challenged by another cat as they leave the litter box, can be disturbing enough to make your cat choose another location.

If your dog tries to steal a snack from the cat's litter box, try placing a baby gate across the doorway to the room the litter box is in (this would also work in a closet doorway, if needed). Place the gate a few inches off the floor so that the cat can get under it but the dog cannot. Besides preventing the dog from harassing the cat as she enters or leaves the box, this will prevent the chance of your dog developing an intestinal obstruction from eating cat litter, or becoming infected with any intestinal worms the cat may have. If your dog is small enough to go under the gate, position the bottom of the gate at the floor and place a stepstool in front of the gate to help the cat jump up and over.



If you have more than one cat, make sure that the litter box is not in a location where one cat can 'corner' another as she leaves the litter box (for example in a hallway that ends in a dead-end). There should always be an entrance and an escape route.

Most cats prefer not to have their litter box right next to their food dish, so avoid this situation if possible.

## Size and type of litter box

There are many types of litter boxes available, including covered boxes, self-cleaning boxes, and boxes designed to fit into

corners. Make sure the litter boxes you provide are the right size(s) for your cat(s). Some animal behaviorists say that the litter boxes people provide are often too small. Keep in mind that kittens or geriatric cats may need boxes with lower sides. If you need a large box with relatively low sides, consider using sweater storage boxes. You can also cut down the sides of the sweater box if needed. Some cats may feel more secure in a litter box with a hood. This can also be helpful for cats who dig very enthusiastically as they cover things up. This may also work well for cats who stand on the edge of the box to urinate or defecate. However, a hooded box can concentrate odor and should be cleaned daily. The new automatic self-cleaning litter boxes can save on clean-up time, but some models are noisy. Some cats seem to be bothered by the noise, some apparently are not. If you have several cats, you might want to provide several types of litter boxes and let your cats choose between them.

#### Litter type

In general, cats seem to like a litter that has the consistency of beach sand or garden soil. They seem to prefer fine-textured litter (such as the clumping type) to more coarse litter, and unscented litter to scented. Two inches of litter in the box is usually sufficient. It generally works better to use less litter and change it more frequently. If you're not sure what type of litter to use, put several types out, including clumping and non-clumping, and see which your cats prefer.

#### Cleanliness

Cats are extremely clean creatures, and they may avoid a litter box that is not cleaned often enough. Scoop the litter boxes at least once daily. Wash the litter box and change the litter completely once a week. Do not clean the box with a strong smelling disinfectant, but rinse the box well after washing it. Any accidents should be cleaned up with an enzyme cleaner specifically made for pet stains, including cat urine. Regular cleaners may mask the odor so that we can't smell it, but to a cat's superior sense of smell, the odor will still be discernible, and can prompt a cat to continue to use that area as the bathroom.

#### Ongoing problems

For help with elimination problems that have already started, please read the article "[Urinating Outside of the Litter Box](#)."

#### Summary

Most cats have a strong instinct to use a litter box, and cats do not need to be housebroken in the same way that we houstrain dogs. However, keeping some 'litter box basics' in mind can help keep your cat content and prevent problems from starting.

### CAUTION

Pregnant women should not clean the litter box. For more information, please see our article on [Toxoplasmosis](#).