CITY OF IRVINE
ANIMAL CARE CENTER

DENVER DUMB FRIENDS LEAGUE

Starting Out Right With Your New Cat And The Litter Box

Copyright 2000. Denver Dumb Friends League. All rights reserved.

Most cats have a specific preference about where they want to eliminate. By following the suggestions outlined in this handout, you'll be able to start off on the right foot with your new cat.

Location

Most people are inclined to place the litter box in an out-of-the-way spot in order to minimize odor and loose particles of cat litter in the house. Often, the litter box ends up in the basement, sometimes next to an appliance and/or on a cold cement floor. This type of location can be undesirable from your cat's point of view for several reasons.

If you have a kitten or an older cat, she may not be able to get down a long flight of stairs in time to get to the litter box. Since she is new to the household, she may not remember where the litter box is if it's located in an area she seldom frequents. Your cat may be startled while using the litter box if a furnace, washer or dryer suddenly comes on and that may be the last time she'll risk such a frightening experience! If your cat likes to scratch the surface surrounding her litter box, she may find a cold cement floor unappealing.

Therefore, you may have to compromise. The litter box should be kept in a location that affords your cat some privacy, but is also conveniently located. If you place the litter box in a closet or a bathroom, be sure the door is wedged open from both sides, in order to prevent her from being trapped in or out. Depending on where it's located, you might consider cutting a hole in a closet door and adding a swinging door. If the litter box sits on a smooth, slick or cold surface, put a small throw rug underneath the litter box.

Type Of Litter

Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained litters, presumably because they have a softer feel. The new scoopable litters usually have finer grains than the typical clay litter. However, high-quality, dust-free, clay litters are relatively small-grained and may be perfectly acceptable to your cat. Potting soil also has a very soft texture, but is not very absorbent. If you suspect your cat has a history of spending time outdoors and is likely to eliminate in your houseplants, you can try mixing some potting soil with your regular litter. Pellet-type litters or those made from citrus peels are not recommended. Once you find a litter your cat likes, don't change types or brands. Buying the least expensive litter or whatever brand happens to be on sale, could result in your cat not using the litter box.

Many cats are put off by the odor of scented or deodorant litters. For the same reason, it's not a good idea to place a room deodorizer or air freshener near the litter box. A thin layer of baking soda placed on the bottom of the box will help absorb odors without repelling your cat. Odor shouldn't be a problem if the litter box is kept clean. If you find the litter box odor offensive, your cat probably finds it even more offensive and won't want to eliminate there.

Number Of Litter Boxes

You should have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats. That way, none of them will ever be prevented from eliminating in the litter box because it's already occupied. You might also consider placing them in several locations around the house, so that no one cat can "guard" the litter box area and prevent the other cats from accessing it. We also recommend that you place at least one litter box on each level of your house. It's not possible to designate a personal litter box for each cat in your household, as cats will use any litter box that's available. Occasionally, a cat may refuse to use the litter box after another cat has used it. In this case, all of the litter boxes will need to be kept extremely clean and additional boxes may be needed.

To Cover Or Not To Cover

Some people prefer to use a covered litter box, however, there are some potential problems with using this type of box. You may want to experiment by offering both types at first, to discover what your cat prefers.

Potential Problems

- You may forget to clean the litter box as frequently as you should because the dirty litter is "out of sight – out of mind."
- A covered litter box traps odors inside, so it will need to be cleaned more often than an open one.
- A covered litter box may not allow a large cat sufficient room to turn around, scratch, dig or position herself in the way she wants.
- A covered litter box may also make it easier for another cat to lay in wait and "ambush" the user as she exits the box. On the other hand, a covered litter box may feel more private and may be preferred by timid cats.

Cleaning The Box

To meet the needs of the most discriminating cat, feces should be scooped out of the litter box daily. How often you change the litter depends on the number of cats you have, the number of litter boxes, and the type of litter you use. Twice a week is a general guideline for clay litter, but depending on the circumstances, you may need to change it every other day or once a week. If you scoop the litter daily, scoopable litter can go two to three weeks before the litter needs to be changed. If you notice an odor or if much of the litter is wet or clumped, it's time for a change. Don't use strong smelling chemicals or cleaning products when washing the litter box, as it may cause your cat to avoid it. Washing with soap and water should be sufficient.

Liners

Some cats don't mind having a liner in the litter box, while others do. Again, you may want to experiment to see if your cat is bothered by a liner in the box. If you do use a liner, make sure it's anchored in place, so it can't easily catch your cat's claws or be pulled out of place.

Depth Of Litter

Some people think that the more litter they put in the box, the less often they will have to clean it. This is not true. Most cats won't use litter that's more than about two inches deep. In fact, some long-haired cats, actually prefer less litter and a smooth, slick surface, such as the bottom of the litter box. The litter box needs to be cleaned on a regular basis and adding extra litter is not a way around that chore.

"Litter-Training" Cats

There's really no such thing as "litter-training" a cat in the same way one would house-train a dog. A cat doesn't need to be taught what to do with a litterbox. The only thing you need to do is provide an acceptable, accessible litter box, using the suggestions above. It's not necessary to take your cat to the litter box and move her paws back and forth in the litter, in fact, we don't recommend it. This may actually be an unpleasant experience for your cat and is likely to initiate a negative association with the litter box.

If Problems Develop

If your cat begins to eliminate in areas other than the litterbox, your first call should always be to your veterinarian. Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cat's litter box habits. If your veterinarian determines that your cat is healthy, the cause may be behavioral. Most litterbox behavior problems can be resolved by using behavior modification techniques. Punishment is not the answer. For long-standing or complex situations, contact an animal behavior specialist who has experience working with cats.

Reprinted with permission from the Denver Dumb Friends League.