

House Training for Kittens and Cats

Learning to eliminate in a chosen area is a crucial skill for pet kittens and cats. Taking a proactive approach will ensure the development of excellent litter box habits.

Getting Started: What Cats Like and Need

Abundant research has been done to determine what cats prefer when it comes to a latrine. Most cats prefer:

- Fine clay, clumping-style litter
- A deep box with at least 3" of digging material
- A box with enough room to enter and turn around without touching the sides or top
- Enough room to eliminate and dig without touching clumped waste or the sides of the box
- A quiet yet easily accessible location
- A box without a cover

There are many commercially available litter boxes, but non-traditional boxes can be used as well. For example, large sweater boxes or storage containers with cut-out entry doors may be spacious and appealing to a large cat. A box should be about 1.5 times the length of your cat's body.

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Some cats eliminate in a standing position, which can cause some urine or stool to fall out of the box. Providing a backslash or a box with high sides will keep the deposits in the box rather than on your floor. On the other hand, small kittens, senior cats, and cats with compromised mobility need sides that are low enough that they can enter and exit comfortably.

How many boxes do I need and where should I put them?

If your home is large, provide several latrines. Try to place a litter box on each floor of the house. Since cats often head for the box after waking up from a nap, provide a box on the same level as your cat's most favored resting places. Litter boxes should not be directly beside cat beds or food dishes.

Do you have more than one cat? A good rule is to provide one box for each cat in the home, **plus one extra box**. If your cats get along well, then you may be able to put the boxes side by side. It is generally better to spread the boxes into different locations in case there is competition around the box. Also, some playful cats ambush their companions, driving them from the box and potentially contributing to house soiling.

Active children, visitors, and other household pets can interfere with your cat's willingness to use a litter box. Be sure there is at least one box in a location that your cat will be able to access without being disturbed or frightened.



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Every cat is an individual. If there are mistakes, or if your cat uses the box but rushes out without covering his stool, he may not love the box. You may need to try a few litter box styles, substrates, and locations to learn your cat's preferences. If in doubt, offer your cat a choice, providing a pair of litter boxes that are just a little different from each other.

If you find that your cat has begun to eliminate in areas outside the litter box, talk with your veterinarian. A little detective work will help you find the ideal box and location for your cat. This should be done without delay because, over time, house soiling can become persistent and potentially more difficult to resolve.

How often do I need to clean the litter box?

Most cats are fastidious by nature. Cats spend a lot of time grooming themselves, and naturally prefer a tidy bathroom as well. Consider a human going into a public restroom: if someone has failed to flush, do you proceed and use the toilet? Doing our best to keep the litter clean and appealing to cats is one of the most important factors in maintaining good elimination habits.

- **Every day:** Scoop out all clumps. Some cats prefer the litter to be scooped even more frequently.
- **Every week:** Empty all litter and any residue from the box, refill with clean litter.
- **Every month:** Empty all litter and thoroughly scrub the box with hot water and mild soap before refilling. Some cats prefer this to be done weekly.
- **Every year:** Completely replace the litter box.

How do I train my kitten or cat where to go?

Most kittens and cats prefer to eliminate in loose, granulated substrates and will naturally discover a nearby box filled with soft kitty litter. However, your new kitten or cat will not necessarily search through the entire house to find this litter.

Young kittens learn good litter habits quickly if they are initially confined to a room with a litter box. Set the room up to be cozy: provide toys, multiple resting spots, food, and water. Spend time visiting and playing with your kitten in the room. Remain with your kitten long enough for her to have a nap and then wake up again, as this is a time she is likely to eliminate. She will probably notice the litter box on her own.

- If your kitten starts sniffing or pawing at the floor, she may be preparing to eliminate. Try digging in the litter with your hand or a litter spoon. If your kitten is very social, she may come to investigate and hop into the box to eliminate. Be careful not to frighten your kitten.
- If your kitten accidentally voids outside the box, you must determine what sort of substrate she prefers and then fill the box with a similar substrate. This is a good time to talk to your veterinarian for some specific training advice.
- Once your kitten has finished eliminating, you may allow her to explore other areas of the home with supervision. When you are too busy to supervise, take her back to her well-stocked room. She should not be free to move around unsupervised until she consistently uses the litter box.
- Newly adopted adult cats may also need some period of confinement for litter box conditioning. It is important to confirm whether your new cat has a strong preference for eliminating in the box and that your cat knows how to navigate to the box from different areas of the house.

Using confinement and supervision to train your cat should prevent your cat from developing a preference for toileting in inappropriate locations. Left on their own, your kitten or cat could deposit urine or feces in hidden areas and, since you may not immediately discover these deposits, this undesirable habit could become well established.

What do I do about mistakes?

If you are supervising your kitten or new cat, and they start to eliminate outside the litter box, you can try to interrupt them by using a novel sound such as a brief whistle. **Do not scold or frighten your cat.** If your kitten stops voiding and looks up at you, you may be able to lure her to the litter box. You may not always have this chance, and it is very important that you do not bring your cat to the box if she is frightened.

Consider the mistake as a learning opportunity for you. Going forward, your kitten may need more supervision. If mistakes begin to occur in specific areas, you may need to place a litter box close to that area.



If you find a deposit of urine or feces outside the box, do not scold your cat and do not carry her to the area. Calmly and quietly clean the area and resolve to better supervise in the future. Make sure to clean the area thoroughly using an enzymatic product such as Urine Away™. Cats have a very acute sense of smell and will be more likely to use the same area in the future if any odor of urine or feces remains on the surface.

Do not punish your kitten or cat for making a mistake. Never shout at or strike your cat. Do not point or rub your cat's nose in the puddle. Punishing your pet for a natural act can make them think they should never toilet near a person and cause them to become secretive or fearful about elimination. Punishment can permanently damage your cat's trust in you.

If your cat repeatedly eliminates outside the litter box:

- Discuss this behavior with your veterinarian promptly. There are several illnesses that can cause a cat to eliminate outside their box.
- Be sure you clean the litter boxes regularly as described above.
- Check to be sure the boxes are big enough for your cat's current size and that they are situated in quiet but easily accessed areas.
- If mistakes occur in one location, consider placing a litter box near that area.
- If you have more than one cat, ensure there are enough litter stations.
- Try a "litter box cafeteria." Set up several litter boxes side by side. Each box should be a little different: different litter, different litter depth, different size.

House training is best accomplished with patience and positive reinforcement. Teaching a cat to be well house-trained makes them a more enjoyable pet and a welcome guest. Many cats nearly house train themselves, but it's important to meet cats' needs to ensure they maintain desirable habits for a lifetime.