

Creating Cat Friendly Litterboxes and Scratching Posts

Tufts Animal Expo 2002

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Many litterbox problems can be prevented by creating a cat-friendly litterbox. Cat-friendly litterboxes take into account what is known from research about cats' preferences for elimination substrates, normal elimination behavior of cats and its development, and what has been learned from successful resolution of problems of litterbox problems. Important factors to consider are the litter, the type of box, location of the box, number of boxes, cleaning and maintenance of the box, covers and liners as well as idiosyncratic preferences of individual cats.

Many destructive scratching problems can be prevented by providing items to scratch that meet the behavioral needs of cats. Individual cats will have different scratching preferences. Some may prefer horizontal objects as compared to vertical ones. Others may like to rake their claws down an object in long strokes while others may prefer to dig their claws in and "pick" repeatedly in the same spot. In order to prevent cats scratching undesired objects, you may first need to provide objects with these different characteristics, observe the new cat to determine her preferences and then provide additional posts and other objects that meet them.

Characteristics of a Cat-Friendly Litterbox*

Litter

- Most cats prefer fine grained material which feels soft, so in general your best bet is to start with a clumping litter which is usually finer than clay.
- The litter should be about 1 ½-2 inches deep. Although some cats will tolerate it deeper, and some like it even shallower, this seems to be a depth that is acceptable to most cats
- Use unscented litter. Some cats do fine with scents, but in generally it's a safer bet to keep the litterbox scent free.

Type of Box

- Use a box that takes into account the cat's physical characteristics. Large cats may need bigger than average boxes Kittens, elderly or ill animals may need one with lower sides for easier access.
- **Unless there is a compelling reason not to, do not use a cover initially. Covers sometimes make it more difficult for a cat to adjust herself to her liking, some cats may be reticent about entering a darker area, and it prevents the cat from monitoring her surroundings while she is in a vulnerable position.**
- **Provide at least as many boxes as there are cats in the family.**
- **Location, Location, Location**
 - Locate the box so that it provides both privacy and is easily accessible.

- Cats need to be able to see in as many directions as possible while they are in the box, or be protected on some sides by walls or other barriers. Don't locate the box so that the cat's view is blocked, allowing a person or animal to startle or "ambush" her.
- Avoid locating the box near appliances whose noise may startle the cat (washer, dryer, furnace, etc.)
- Do not place multiple boxes right next to one another. This may make all boxes inaccessible to other cats if one cat is using one of the boxes.
- Try to position the box so there is more than one exit route from it. This prevents a cat from being trapped in the box by another pet.

Cleanliness

- Faeces and clumps should be scooped daily.
- The litter should be changed often enough so that it always looks dry and clean. Frequency will depend on the number of boxes, the type of litter and the number of cats.
- There should be no dried urine or stool on the box or no odor detectable from the box itself. If there is, the box needs washing. Use a mild, unscented cleaning product.
- Liners may be used to make upkeep easier. Roll the open end of the liner closed and clamped to the box with a bag clip, to minimize loose folds that the cat may catch her claws in.
- If you will not be able to keep up a consistent cleaning schedule, consider a self-cleaning litterbox which activates 10 minutes after the cat leaves the box, and rakes the waste into a container at one end of the box.

*Modified from *Pet Behavior Protocols: What To Say, What To Do, When to Refer*.
By S. Hetts, AAHA Press, Lakewood, CO, 1999.

Characteristics of Cat-Friendly Scratching Objects*

Location:

- Provide scratching posts in areas where the cat will likely need them, based on the various behavioral reasons for scratching.
- Near favorite resting places for stretching
- In easily accessible areas for play and claw maintenance
- Near doors to the house for greeting/markings
- Near "off-limit" objects the cat has tried to scratch, to provide an alternative

Texture:

- After identifying how the cat likes to scratch (pick, rake or both depending on the motivation), provide textures which will allow this
- Horizontally wrapped sisal will not allow a cat to rake in long strokes, but is superb for "picking"
- Objects covered with carpet may be better for raking
- Cut cardboard may allow both patterns

Height and Orientation

- Some of the scratching objects should be tall enough to allow the cat to extend to her full reach. This is probably why many cats like drapes. Few commercially available objects (except the tall cat condos) allow cats to reach this high.
- Determine what angle the cat likes to scratch-horizontal, vertical, something in between or all of the above. Make sure the scratching post is sturdy and will not collapse, move or fall over when the cat uses it.

Encourage the Cat to Use the Object

- Use things that will motivate the cat to approach and investigate the post. Try scenting it with catnip, attach a toy protruding up from the top of the post to encourage the cat to jump up and perhaps scratch on her way down.

Discourage Scratching Of Other Objects

- Initially, "cat-proof" the house as much as possible. Put objects that the cat will likely enjoy scratching out of reach (e.g., turn stereo speakers toward the wall).
- For those items that can't be removed, change their texture so they are less appealing. They can be covered with plastic, sandpaper, double-sided sticky tape, or vinyl carpet runner pointy-side out. A section of carpet runner or sandpaper could also be put on the floor where the cat would need to stand to scratch the object (e.g., on the floor in front of the drapes).
- If objects can't be removed or made less attractive, you may need to limit the cat's access to them when you can't watch her until good scratching habits are established.

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Additional Detail

When litterbox problems arise, the first step is for the cat to receive a thorough medical workup to evaluate possible disease or illness that could be influencing the behavior. The majority of cat elimination problems involve surface and location preferences, often associated with litterbox aversions. In these cases, medication is usually not relevant.

Destructive scratching behavior can often be managed by providing a sufficient number of scratching objects that the cat will use. Declawing to address destructive scratching is a controversial issue. A good review of this subject has been done by Patronek (see reference list).

Summary

Meeting the cat's behavioral needs for elimination and scratching requires more than just setting out a litterbox and a scratching post. Cat owners can benefit from specific instructions on what cats are likely to prefer. Preventing scratching and elimination problems is much easier than changing undesirable habits once they have developed.

References

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