

# How to Avoid Singing the Litter Box Blues

-Getting your cat to 'think inside the box' -

by

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According to Wikipedia, “Blues is a music genre that originated in African-American communities of primarily the Deep South of the United States from spirituals, work songs, field hollers, and rhymed simple narrative ballads. The term can also refer to the ‘blue devils’, meaning melancholy and sadness. In lyrics the phrase is often used to describe a depressed mood.” In the normal master/servant relationship that exists between cats and their ‘owners’, many times you may end up singing the Blues if your master (your cat) starts eliminating outside its litter box.

The first thing to understand is that an indoor environment is not a natural environment for the cat. There are a number of things that we ‘do’ for them that are done for our convenience, but not for theirs. Do not get me wrong, we are not advocating turning all your indoor cats into outdoor cats. It is just the first step in understanding how a cat thinks. Cats are natural predators and hunters. When we bring them indoors, many times we forget the rules of the game for being a predator and hunter. Cats are also very fastidious and clean animals. If we know a little bit about their nature, it may make it easier to understand why litter box problems may develop.

The first thing we have to consider is what we put in a litter box: the litter itself. If you go to a pet store, you will find all kinds of litter available, from the basic clay litter, to reprocessed newspapers, to organic corn-cob litter, to the most popular type: the clumping litter. Studies have shown that the most popular litter for cats as far as their preferences are concerned is the clumping litter. It compares most favorably to what they find out in the wild. Among the clumping litters, the winner in litter preference tests has been Fresh Step with odor-eliminating carbon additive. This does not mean you need to change if you have one that your cat uses on a regular basis with no problems. Even among the Fresh Step or other litters, avoid those that are artificially scented. Using unscented litter is always the best.

Clumping litter is the most popular, but it too comes with problems: 1) It is a dustier litter, and if you or your cats have upper respiratory problems or allergies, it can create some breathing difficulties when changing the litter box; 2) It tends to track. Because it is a finely ground litter, your long-haired cat may track it when coming out of the litter box; 3) It lures people into a false sense of security that they do not need to change it as often. This can be a big problem as people believe that when they scoop the litter box that they are getting all of the elimination. That unfortunately is not true, and you will usually have a small part of the clumping urine left behind. This becomes more of a problem when you do not put a thick layer of litter down in the effort to save money. The urine soaked litter will stick to the bottom of the box, and odor will continue to build. Think of a partially flushed toilet that never gets completely flushed. People, believing that they get most of the urine-soaked litter out, will just add more litter to the box and reduce the times they change the litter out of the whole box. Odors will soon build up, and **a bad odor in the litter box is the number one reason why they quit using the litter box.**

So what should we do? Listed below are some recommendations from a fellow servant-to-cats:

- **HAVE AT LEAST 3 INCHES OF LITTER** at the bottom (clumping preferred) of the box so that the urine never makes it to bottom of the box. You will find that putting only one or two inches in the box will not be enough.
- **SCOOP THE LITTER BOX TWICE DAILY** if at all possible.
- **COMPLETELY EMPTY AND CHANGE THE LITTER OUT OF THE BOX AT LEAST EVERY ONE TO TWO WEEKS** (more often in multi-cat households).
- **WHEN WASHING THE LITTER BOX, DO NOT USE HARSH CHEMICALS SUCH AS BLEACHES OR LYSOL-LIKE PRODUCTS** to ‘kill all the germs’. These leave harsh odors behind that are also offensive to the cat. Scrubbing with dish washing soap is better.
- **ONCE A YEAR GET A BRAND NEW LITTER BOX.** Plastic absorbs odors. If you do not believe so, try making a garlic spaghetti sauce and storing it in a Tupperware container.
- **DO NOT USE COVERED LITTER BOXES!** Covered litter boxes only trap odors and are similar to us using Port-a-Potties. Another reason for not using covered litter boxes is the predator nature of the cat. In the wild, the cat is not always the largest predator. Because of this, the cat does not want to eliminate in a ‘cave’, but rather out in the open so that it can keep an eye out for other predators (and possibly future prey). In a household, a covered litter box can act as a cave, and the cat may not want to be trapped by a bullying companion cat or the household dog, if there is one. This also means avoid putting a litter box in tight, confined spaces such as under stairwells which can mimic a covered litter box.
- Always try to follow the general rule of **ONE LITTER BOX PER CAT, PLUS ONE.** This can be a challenge in some households. A lot of people who live in a home with multi-stories put all their litter boxes in the basement (again, the best for us). If your cat(s) like to stay on the second floor of the house, they may find some suitable substrate such as the bathroom rug to use for a toilet vs. making the trek all the way down to the basement. If at all possible, spread the litter boxes out so that you avoid having the litter boxes on only one floor. This is especially important if you have senior citizen or obese cats that may have trouble making it up and down stairs.
- Follow the real estate rule of **LOCATION, LOCATION, and LOCATION!** Choose a location that your cat will appreciate. Try to avoid placing the litter box near their feeding areas. No one likes to be seated near the bathroom in a restaurant. This also means avoiding busy stair wells, high traffic areas, and appliances that may suddenly turn on and scare your cat while in the litter box: furnaces, dishwashers, and washing machines/dryers. Many cats can get very anxious already without having to worry about Freddie Kruger coming out of the furnace as they use the bathroom. The location of the litter box should be one where your cat will not encounter any surprises.
- As far as litter boxes are concerned, **SIZE DOES MATTER!** Do not skimp on the size of the litter box. The bigger the better. If you were remodeling your house and the bathroom was the target of the remodeling, would you make a larger or a smaller one? Do not find yourself constrained by what you find in the pet stores. Use your imagination and create custom-sized litter boxes by visiting the storage container department of your local department store. The variety can be endless, and the under-the-bed storage containers can make great litter boxes for the multi-cat households. You can also be creative for those cats that are messy when covering up after themselves. Get storage containers with higher sides, take the top off, and cut out the front so that they can walk into the litter box. Creativity can pay off here.

- **AVOID CHANGING TYPES OF LITTERS** or brands to save a few dollars. Cats develop a comfort zone and do not like changes. If you do make a change, get an additional litter box to place beside a current litter box to test the acceptability of the new litter to your cat. Your cat will soon let you know whether the change can be made by the number of times it visits the new litter box with its new kind of litter.
- **AVOID NEW STRESSES IN A CAT'S LIFE.** This is probably the hardest thing to control as it seems that it does not take much to stress out a cat. Stress can include a new member of the family in the household (can we say 'baby'), new cat/kitten or dog in the household, a neighborhood cat that 'visits too often', a companion bullying cat, an obtrusive dog that does not know its place in the household, the servant to the master goes on a trip and does not consult the master or make up to him/her when they get back. As you can see, the list can be endless. If you know sudden changes may be coming up, you may want to consider a natural pheromone treatment via a plug-in diffuser or pheromone collar to lessen the anxiety, and hopefully avoid the litter box blues.
- **MAKE SURE THERE IS NOT A MEDICAL PROBLEM THAT IS ACTUALLY CAUSING THE ELIMINATION BEHAVIOR PROBLEM.** This will entail a visit to the veterinarian to rule out potential medical problems that can cause a litter box aversion. These would include urinary tract infection, constipation, diarrhea, bladder stones, feline lower urinary tract disease, kidney disease, diabetes and others. Special litter is available to help collect samples of urine for testing, and the veterinarian can also collect urine by a technique called cystocentesis. Rule out medical problems before assuming that is a behavioral problem.

It seems like a lot to learn and absorb when it comes to litter boxes, but it is a known fact that the No. 1 behavior problem that is reported to a veterinarian when it comes to cats is misuse of the litter box. It is also probably the number one reason why cats are removed from their current homes and taken to shelters. With a little work and understanding you can avoid many of these issues. Leave the Blues to those folks who enjoy this genre of music, and enjoy many years of a happy relationship with your cat (that's 'master' to you).