

How to Avoid Singing the Litter Box Blues

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

by

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According to Wikipedia, the “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 predatory 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 homes with multi-stories put all their litter boxes in the basement (again, the best for us) to keep them out of sight and any potential odors. 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 (you!) 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 or other stresses are coming up and can be identified ahead of time, 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. Consult with a veterinarian on preventative steps to de-stress your cat.
- **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. When you first detect there is an elimination behavior problem involving your cat(s), do not wait long before consulting your veterinarian. The longer you wait, the harder it may become to correct. In a multi-cat household, be sure to correctly identify which cat has the elimination behavior problem, and also try to watch for bullying by the other cat(s) in the household, and other potential stresses. 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(s) (that's 'master' to you!).



What to Do When Your Cat Thinks Outside of the Box

Written by Karen Overall, MA, VMD, PhD, DACVB, Laurie Bergman, VMD, DACVB, and Christine Calder, DVM, DACVB

The most common behavioral concerns reported by clients about their cats involve litter box use. Complaints about litter box use can often be prevented and usually be successfully treated if the client becomes good at observing their cat's behavior. The key to resolving **all** elimination concerns is to recognize and be able to identify the pattern in the choices the cat makes about elimination. If clients can do this the problem will resolve. Otherwise, you need to know that *the single biggest reason why cats are relinquished or euthanized involves elimination behaviors that the clients views as problematic*, whether these are true behavioral problem for the cat.

For cats, the world of odor is a rich one. All of their affiliative social behaviors involve odor and rubbing on or wrapping around each other, and many of the behaviors of concern are also affected by odor.....whether they are scenting another cat or that cat's urine.



Smelling where another cat has been – notice the piloerection and elevated stance of the cat.



Cats that have a close affiliative relationship rubbing scent on each other using their tails, heads, and cheeks.

Cats enhance their ability to perceive and identify odor through a Flehmen response where they inhale and aerosolize the odor in a way that allows them to taste and smell it at the same time and further identify it by processing through the vomeronasal organ and the olfactory bulb.



A young, captive cheetah in a cheetah sanctuary exhibiting a Flehmen response to urine an adult sprayed on the other side of the fence.

Responses to unfamiliar odors – or odors associated with illness or individuals that the cat does not like – can include aggression, spraying urine on a vertical or horizontal surface, and/or not using the litter box.



A cat spraying while moving his tail in a quivering manner and treading his feet.

Feline house-soiling problems can generally be divided into two broad categories: inappropriate elimination and marking. Inappropriate elimination describes cats who are eliminating (emptying their bowels and/or bladders) in locations their owners consider inappropriate (in other words, not in their litter boxes). This is a situation where the pet is performing a bodily maintenance behavior in a way that doesn't fit with our idea of how a pet should behave.

Marking, on the other hand, is a social behavior and a form of communication. Cats most typically mark with urine rather than feces. The majority of cats who urine mark, both male and female, spray urine on vertical surfaces (see illustration above). Some cats will also urine mark on horizontal surfaces. Rarely, cats will only mark on horizontal surfaces. These are usually areas of social significance like prominent objects, near doors and windows, places with new odors or areas where the cat encounters other pets.

You can usually distinguish inappropriate elimination from marking by the following:

Inappropriate Elimination	Marking
Usually Horizontal Surfaces	Vertical Surfaces-walls and drapes
Squatting position	Most cats will stand but some will squat
Large amounts of urine and/or feces	Small amounts of urination
Eliminates near the box but not in it	Areas of social significance
Digs/scratches to prepare spot and cover	Males > females; Intact > neutered
Equally likely in male and female	Underlying medical conditions are uncommon
Underlying medical conditions are common	

Concerns about inappropriate elimination use generally involve one or more of the following complaints and involve squatting behaviors:

- the cat doesn't use the box at all;
- the cat uses the box for either urine or feces, but not both;
- the cat eliminates right next to or on the box, but not in it;
- the cat uses the box but doesn't cover urine or feces. Not covering urine or feces – if this is not a change in behavior – may be normal.
- If the cat used to cover and now doesn't, the cat's perception of the experience changed.

Cleanliness of the box is often the number one reason that cats will choose other locations to eliminate. Location, litter type, litter box size, and type of box are important factors to evaluate when determining a cause. The litterbox should be scooped at least daily and the litter changed once a week. Cleaning the box with soap and water is preferred over other types of cleaners.

Current research shows that the most important factor when choosing a box is size and not necessarily whether it is covered or not. Most commercial litter boxes are too small for the average cat and creating a box out of Rubbermaid containers or a sweater box may be a better choice. Most cats do not like automatic litter boxes or litter box liners.

Cats with a litter box aversion will often avoid the box completely, fail to dig in the box or cover their elimination. Many will straddle the box, shake their feet excessively after leaving the box or eliminate near but not in the box. If it is a substrate aversion, they will show a preference for a particular substrate such as carpet, tile, or piece of furniture. These cats will often choose a closet or secluded area of the house and often have a medical reason that initially causes elimination out of the box, but the behavior continues after the primary condition resolves.

Overall, the treatment for inappropriate elimination and marking in cats is similar. Regular scooping of the box along with non-scented, clay, clumping litter will make the box more appealing. Location matters with most cats preferring a quiet, secluded area for elimination away from loud appliances, furnaces, and air conditioners. Multiple litterboxes give choice for elimination with some cats choosing to urinate in one box and defecate in another. With cats that have a litter box aversion or develop a substrate preference, medication is often not necessary. Once the aversion or preference is identified and managed, the cat often returns to using the box.

Treatment for marking cats involves identifying the underlying cause. When there are multiple cats in the household, make sure there are plenty of resources in the form of litter boxes, feeding stations, vertical spaces, sleeping stations, hiding areas, and water bowls. Punishment is often ineffective and confusing for these cats. Reward-based training helps to improve communication while providing mental stimulation and positive human interaction. Food dispensing and puzzle toys mimic hunting and encourage exploration of their environment reducing overall stress levels and meet basic needs. Medication is often beneficial when treating marking cats.

General guidelines that will help you meet the basic litter box needs include the following suggestions.

1. Have one more litter box than you have cats so that fussier cats can find a clean box.
2. Scoop the box multiple times a day.
3. Even with clumpable litters, dump the box at least once or twice a week.
4. Wash the box weekly, rinse well, and air dry to remove any odor of cleaning agent. Hot water and soap is best for cleaning.
5. Don't use scented litter, liners or additives like baking soda.
6. Get a litter box that is 1.5 times the cat's body length where the cat can move and turn around – underbed sweater boxes make great litter boxes.
7. If the cat likes to dig, make the litter deep. If the cat flicks the litter from his or her feet, make the litter shallow or switch to a different type (pelleted sawdust, buckwheat, et cetera).
8. Wash, rinse and dry any area the cat has soiled outside the box and then use a good odor elimination. The best ones help to enzymatically break down urine compound and make some odorants too heavy to be sniffed.
9. Regardless, follow the cat around and see what that cat chooses – mimic that choice.

Cats tell us every day what they like and what they do not like. We need to understand and listen to them.