Help, my cat is refusing to use their cat litter tray

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You don’t have to toilet train a cat in the same way you would a dog - and many instinctively just ‘get it’. That said, sometimes a cat will start urinating or defecating outside of their litter tray which isn’t great news for their owners or their carpets!

The key is to discover what’s making your furry friend avoid their litter tray. Might they have a urinary infection? Do they dislike their cat litter or not find it clean enough (cats are very clean)? Or has something happened to throw your cat off kilter?

Problems with the litter tray or litter

If you know your feline friend is fit and well, it could be that there’s an issue with the litter, the litter tray or where it’s positioned. (Did we mention cats are quite fussy!)

Let’s start with the litter tray. Is it big enough for your cat to comfortably move around, dig and cover without feeling restricted? Can they get in and out of it easily? If it has high sides that could be a real problem for a kitten with little legs or an older cat with arthritis. Have you recently opted for a litter tray with a hood or a self-cleaning model? Some cats love these, but others not so much.

Once you're confident the litter tray itself isn't putting your cat off, it's time to think about the litter. If you've recently changed it, your cat might not like its fragrance or texture. Some feline friends are all about non-clumping cat litter, for example, while for others it's clumping cat litter or nothing! Or it could simply be that the litter isn't clean enough. Cats are scrupulously clean and will require their litter to be too. If you think this could be a factor, check out 4 things you need to know about keeping a cat litter box clean.

Problems with where the litter tray is

Sometimes a cat will avoid a litter tray because they're not happy with where it has been positioned. Maybe it's somewhere too busy? Or in a place where a loud noise such as the washing machine hitting the spin cycle frightened them? Or maybe the litter tray is too near to their food and water bowls? Yes, cats are quite particular about where you put their litter tray - just as they are about most things!

Things that could have affected your cat's behaviour

Just like us humans, cats can be thrown off balance by changes in life whether that's a house move or a new pet or baby in the family. If there have been any such events recently and your cat has suddenly stopped using their litter tray it's likely the two things are connected. In fact, urinating or defecating outside the litter box is one of the most common signs a cat is stressed. If this is the case, try to make things as easy on your furry friend as possible by providing them with safe places to hide. And, if the anxiety continues, you might want to talk to your vet or a cat behaviourist.

Urine marking

Because it involves elimination outside the litter tray, many cat owners consider urine marking a litter tray problem, but actually they're different issues. If you're not sure which one you're dealing with, check out Urine spraying or cat litter tray avoidance? How to tell the difference.

Health problems that can cause your cat to avoid the litter box

If your cat has previously used the litter tray happily and they suddenly start eliminating outside of it, it's a good idea to talk to your vet to rule out any medical problems (particularly if you've also noticed blood in their urine or they seem uncomfortable). Things such as cystitis, kidney stones or a UTI can make your cat come to associate their litter tray with pain.

7 questions to ask

- Is there a problem with the litter tray itself?
- Is your cat happy with the litter?
- Is there a problem with the where the litter tray is positioned?
- Does your cat think their litter tray is clean enough?
- Has something made your cat stressed?
- Is your cat urine marking? (Not strictly a litter tray issue.)
- Might there be a medical problem?

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