

LITTER BOX BLUES

When Your Cat Won't Use the Box

Cats are naturally clean animals, equipped with the desire to neatly deposit their waste and bury it. If your cat has started using places other than the litter box to urinate and/or defecate, then Tiger is trying to tell you something.

You and your cat share a problem which can be solved with a little detective work, some common sense, and time. Your job is to make the litter box as attractive to Tiger as possible and make the "accident" zone an unattractive place to go.

STOP: Have you talked to your veterinarian about this problem?

The first and most important step to solving your cat's litter box problem is to rule out any physical reason for the situation. Tiger may be giving you signals that something serious is physically wrong; pay attention! A bladder or kidney infection, a blockage, or diabetes are possible causes and are all very dangerous. **Your cat may need immediate medical attention.**

After your veterinarian has eliminated the possibility of a physical cause for the situation, **then** you can begin to address it as a behavior problem.

Other than physical causes, the primary reasons for a cat to soil in places other than in the litter box are **stress and conditions or negative memories of the box**. Try to look at the situation from your cat's point of view. You cannot effectively correct the problem without knowing Tiger's reason.

What's wrong with Tiger's litter box?

The solution may lie in a simple adjustment which will make the box acceptable to your cat. Tiger may be avoiding the litter box because there is something about **the box itself** that is unpleasant, either now or in the past.

1. Is the box kept clean? While some cats are more tolerant than others, cats simply will not use a dirty box. Remember: if **you** can smell the box, then the odor is certainly offensive to your cat.

ADJUSTMENT: Keep the litter box clean by scooping out wastes at least once every day; twice is better. At least once a week, dump litter into a strong garbage bag - - **not** your toilet - - and dispose of it. Wash the box with hot soapy water (never strong detergents, ammonia, or bleach), rinse and dry thoroughly, and add fresh litter. To help absorb odors and make clean-up easier, try a layer of baking soda in the bottom of the box.

The frequency of your box-cleaning routine depends partially on the number of cats in your home, the quality of their food, and Tiger's and your own tolerance of odor.

In general, if the box still has an odor an hour after you have scooped out the most recent wastes, it's time to dump the whole box and start with fresh litter.

2. Does Tiger feel safe in the box? Your cat doesn't want a parade around the litter box. After all, a cat using the box is in a vulnerable position!

Adjustment: Place the box in a private location, avoiding places too near Tiger's food or bed, or in high-traffic areas. This place should be easy-access and easy-escape, so your pet can see any potential danger approaching. If you have other pets (or young children) in your home, Tiger may be getting ambushed in the litter box!

If you change the location of the box, do it gradually. Move it four or five feet each day toward the new location, where you can place an additional box temporarily to help Tiger adjust.

3. How many litter boxes are in your home? In a large home, or even a small one with more than one level, one box may not be easily available to your cat (especially if Tiger is overweight or over eight years old). And if you have more than one cat in your family, Tiger may not like using a box with another cat's smell (and the "top cat" may not **want** Tiger to use it!)

Adjustment: You need at least one box per cat in your home, and **two** per cat if you have much space in your home; upstairs and downstairs, at the very least.

4. Do you use plastic liners in the box? Some people like the convenience of a plastic bag-style liner in the litter box. However, many cats dislike the movement of the slick liner beneath their paws when they scratch to bury their waste. And if Tiger's claws scratch through the plastic, the liner will leak dirty litter when you change it . . . which defeats the purpose of using it!

Adjustment: Especially if your cat is an enthusiastic digger-and-scratcher, try a week or so without plastic liners. You'll probably find that Tiger much prefers to feel a stable, sturdy box. (If you must line the box, try newspaper.)

5. Do you use a covered litter box? Hooded litter boxes are for **human** convenience - - it hides the "view." Some cats like the privacy of the hooded box. However, many others feel insecure because they can't see approaching surprises. The hood also tends to hold in odors. Even a fairly clean box can smell offensive to Tiger as odors collect under the hood. And, unfortunately a covered box is often a forgotten box. The less frequently the litter box is cleaned, the more smells will collect and Tiger may refuse to enter it.

Adjustment: Take the hood off of the box. If you and Tiger want added privacy, try putting the litter box into a large cardboard box with three high sides and **no** top. Cut out the front to leave an entrance into the litter box.

6. Is Tiger drowning in litter? Your cat needs enough litter to dig in and to cover waste. Too much litter is simply wasted, and some cats (especially declawed cats) will be alarmed if their feet sink.

Adjustment: Cover the bottom of the box with only two or three inches of plain or scoopable sand litter.

7. Are you using perfumed litter or additives? Have you frequently switched litter brands or types? Perfumed or deodorized litters can offend your cat's sensitive nose and cause Tiger to reject the litter box. Changing back and forth between litters is confusing and stressful for your cat.

Adjustment: Find a plain, low-dust litter that Tiger likes and stick with it. It will be more attractive to Tiger and cheaper for you! (**Note:** An alternative may be one of the soft, "scoopable" sand litters. Read the label and follow the instructions carefully; you still must empty the litter box regularly. To avoid sand being spread throughout your home, put a piece of indoor/outdoor carpeting or "welcome" mat beside the box to help wipe excess sand from Tiger's paws.)

8. Could this be stress-related behavior, not directly connected to the Box? As you look for the cause of your cat's behavior, keep in mind that Tiger May be upset about a change in your home. When the first "accident" occurred, was anything different Happening in your life – good **or** bad? Tiger may have reacted to that stress, change, or commotion.

Even if things have now calmed down, the urine mark remains from the initial problem. You will still need to use the following steps to eliminate the leftover evidence and to retrain Tiger.

How do I remove Tiger's odor from the "accident" zone?

As long as your cat can smell that personal scent, Tiger will continue to return to the "accident" zone. Even if you can't smell traces of urine, Tiger can. Your most important chore is to remove (neutralize) that odor.

Soak up as much of the urine as possible with a combination of news paper and paper towels. The more fresh urine you can remove (especially from carpeting) before it dries, the simpler it will be to remove the odor. Place a **THICK** layer of paper towels on the wet spot and cover with a thick layer of newspaper. Stand on this padding for about a minute. Remove and discard the padding, check the area for dampness, and repeat if necessary.

Rinse the affected zone thoroughly with water; blot. Then use one of the high-quality pet odor neutralizers available at pet supply stores; try to find one specifically made for cat urine odors. Test the affected surface for staining first, and **READ THE INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY.**

If you have previously used cleaners of any kind (including natural substances like vinegar) on the area, then the neutralizer will not be effective unless you **rinse every trace** of the old cleaner from the carpet. For old or heavy stains in carpeting, consider renting an extractor (NOT steam cleaner) from a local hardware store. This machine operates much like a vacuum cleaner and is an efficient, economical (around \$20) rinsing method.

Following the machine's instructions, use the extractor to run **plain, clean water** through the carpet and pad, soaking thoroughly and vacuuming the dirty water back into the machine.

OK, the zone is clean. Can I keep Tiger from returning to that location?

You must make the "accident" zone unattractive for Tiger to use as a substitute litter box. It may take some trial and error to find the right repellent for your cat, but these are some suggestions:

Choose an odor that Tiger strongly dislikes; good possibilities are lemon juice, Tabasco sauce, citrus-based cologne, strong pepper, or mothballs in mesh bags. After testing a small area that doesn't show, rub or spray a few drops into the zone where Tiger usually urinates.

If the surface will stain, soak a washcloth in the chosen odor. Place the cloth on a piece of foil over the **entire** "accident" zone, anchoring with tape or weights.

Cover the zone with a texture Tiger doesn't like underfoot. Try aluminum foil heavy plastic (a dropcloth is ideal), since most cats dislike urine to pool up around their feet. Either kind of covering must be secured with tape or weights and should cover the entire marked zone. Otherwise, Tiger will simply move the obstacle aside.

Strips of double-sided carpet tape or a large piece of adhesive shelf paper (reverse side up) will feel sticky and unpleasant to Tiger's feet without actually pulling out hair or causing pain.

Most cats will not urinate in a place where they eat, sleep, or play regularly. Try playing with Tiger near the zone or leaving a handful of dry food on an anchored piece of foil.

This alternative does not combine well with the negative methods (above); choose one or the other.

What won't work:

Spraying Tiger with water, shouting, or throwing handy objects are **not** effective methods of correcting bad habits in cats. Tiger will simply urinate where you can't see, or use that favorite zone when you aren't around!

What else should I do to encourage Tiger to use the box?

You now have the right conditions, if you followed the advice above, to retrain Tiger to use the litter box. Tiger may figure out the new, positive arrangements immediately. But if the habit is old, or the unpleasant memories of the box are too strong, you may have to **convince** Tiger that the litter box is a great place!

The retraining period may take a week or more. It took time to build the bad habit, and it will take time to build a new one. Treat your cat with patience and lots of encouragement.

Escort Tiger to the litter box four or five times a day for the first few days of the retraining period. Ideal opportunities for these reminders are after heavy play sessions, after Tiger wakes up from naps, and ten to fifteen minutes after meals.

Set your cat into the litter and step away to give some privacy. Praise Tiger warmly for using the box or even just for digging. You may want to add a small treat to your praise (but not every time; staggered treat-times keep Tiger interested).

Never scold or force your cat to remain in the litter box. If Tiger seems confused or nervous, dig lightly in the litter with your fingers. Talk softly and calmly, using Tiger's name.

When you're away from home or unable to supervise your cat's "bath room" habits, keep Tiger's world small, secure, and without temptations! Isolate Tiger in a friendly room with:

- a clean litter box
- a water bowl
- a favorite toy
- a radio, set at low volume
- a window (if possible)
- a soft nest

The room should be large enough that the litter box is clearly separated from the nest and water. Spend a few minutes talking and stroking Tiger **in** the "time-out" room each time you isolate your cat - - **before and after**.

After a few days, put a small rug into the room as a test. If your cat still uses the litter box faithfully, even with this temptation, you can release Tiger for longer periods of time.