Common Litterbox Issues
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One of the most common feline behavior issues reported to veterinarians is inappropriate elimination or failure to use a litterbox characterized by urinating/defecating in the surrounding area with no signs of pain or other changes such as lethargy or anorexia. This is also a very common reason for relinquishment of cats to shelters, cat abandonment, or euthanasia. However, the problem may not necessarily result from mental or biological issues as one may think. Actually, the feline companion may have issues with the litterbox and these commonly fall into two categories: something is undesirable about the litterbox or an unpleasant experience involving the litterbox has occurred.

Many things can be undesirable about the litterbox that we, as the owner, may not realize. This can include the litterbox size, litter characteristics, or location of the box. Cats are more comfortable using a litterbox in which they can freely move. The recommended size of a litterbox is at least one and a half times the length of the cat from the tip of the nose to the base of its tail. However, if you are the lucky owner of a larger cat, this can pose a bit of an issue since many commercial litterboxes are insufficient when it comes to size. One option that has been successful for cat owners is a large plastic storage box with low sides. An entry can be cut out of the side if necessary to make this more suited to your pet.

Other aspects of the litterbox which may be causing the issue include cleanliness of the box, liners, and hooded boxes. The litter in the box should be scooped once a day at a minimum. The litterbox should be emptied and washed with soap and hot water every 1-4 weeks (depending on the number of cats using the box). Liners which are commonly used to make cleaning easier may be problematic since the cat’s claw may hang in the plastic. Hooded litterboxes are more aesthetically pleasing to people, but these can actually limit the cat’s movement and trap odors.

Cats also have preferences in litter. Discontentment with the litter by the cat posturing on the side of the box, pawing at the area surrounding the box while trying to cover their waste, and/or bolting out of the litter box when they are finished. If this describes your cat, your next question is likely, “What litter should I use?” Grocery stores and pet supply stores always have numerous options of litter available. The options include scented or unscented, clumping or non-clumping, multi-cat litter, natural litter, and flushable litter. In general, cats prefer unscented, fine clumping litter. Over time, cats have evolved from desert animals to household pets, so the more sand-like, the better. However, many companies do not blatantly state scented or non-scented. Many companies use the term “multi-cat” to indicate the litter is scented, so it may take a bit of searching to determine which options do not include a perfume. Another rule of thumb to keep in mind is that several inches (4-6”) is ideal. Cats want to cover their waste, so if you hear them scratching at the bottom of the litterbox, more litter may be necessary.

The location of the box is also something to consider. Usually the owner places the litter box in an area that will not be seen by houseguests and will be convenient for the owner. However, there are things that should also be taken into consideration. Cats do not appreciate eating and drinking near their bathroom. Therefore, food and water bowls should be no less than several feet away from the litterbox. Since many pathogens and parasites are transmitted via a fecal-oral route, this placement can also help
prevent health issues and keep your feline friend healthy. The box should also be in an area that is quiet and undisturbed by traffic.

Traumatic episodes can affect the cat’s relationship with the litterbox. If he/she has recently been the victim of intimidation or sudden noises while using the restroom, the box may be associated with a negative experience. However, the source of this trauma may not be a houseguest or another pet like one may think. This can be as simple as a washer/dryer turning on or an automatic air freshener which sprays perfume into the air at set time intervals. While we may have become accustomed to these sounds and consider them background noise, they can easily startle and scare the pet away. If this is hard to imagine, place yourself in the cat’s mind for a moment. You walk to the box, begin to do your business, and you hear this strange sound like a cat hissing. You jump out and begin to scurry out of the room as moisture falls from the sky. In my opinion, this is enough to make some of the calmest cats become anxious about their litterbox experience.

If your pet is inappropriately eliminating or his/her litterbox habits are changing, ask yourself the following questions. Is the litterbox large enough for my pet to comfortably move around? Does my pet paw at the surrounding area, posture on the side of the box, or quickly run out of the box afterwards? Is the box in a location of high traffic? Could there have been a traumatic episode in my pets recent past that caused a negative relationship with the litterbox? If you think any of these could be a possibility, I recommend making the necessary changes in your pet’s environment to help this relationship return to a positive one.

If you find yourself needing more assistance with this transition or if the above tips do not seem to fix your current issue, please contact your veterinarian. He or she may be able to make other suggestions as well as dispensing a pheromone spray such as Feliway.

References:
Schuerer, PA, Grace, SF. “Seeing the Litterbox from the Cat’s Point of View.” Animal Ark Animal Hospital. April 2013. Print.