



# THE KITTY DIGEST

## TRAINING TIPS BROUGHT TO YOU BY MUTTS WITH MANNERS

### Litterbox Basics & Beyond

### Understanding Litter Preferences, Box Setups, and Problem Solving for Cats

By Trelle Dandridge - Mutts with Manners

Using a litter box is a natural behavior for cats, but how, where, and what they prefer can vary widely. When litter box issues appear, they are often a form of communication rather than disobedience.

Our goal is not to “train” cats to tolerate a setup they dislike, but to **listen to their preferences and remove barriers to success.**

### Why Litter Box Problems Happen



When a cat stops using the litter box or uses it inconsistently, common causes include:

- Stress or environmental change
- Medical discomfort
- Litter type aversions
- Box design or location issues
- Competition or tension in multi-cat homes
- Negative past experiences with the box

Important Note: Cats rarely eliminate outside the box out of spite. They are responding to something that no longer feels safe, comfortable, or accessible.

### Litter Preferences: Yes, Cats Can Be “Litter Specific”

### Low-tracking litter features

	particle size	particle weight	particle texture	dust content
 <b>DO</b>	 larger particles	 heavier litter	 smooth particles	 low-dust litter
 <b>DON'T</b>	 sand-like litter	 super lightweight litter	 rough particles	 high-dust litter



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Many cats develop strong preferences for specific litter textures, often based on early experiences. Common litter types include:

#### **Clumping Clay**

- Soft texture similar to sand
- Easy to scoop
- Most commonly preferred by cats
- Dust can be an issue for sensitive cats or humans

#### **Non-Clumping Clay**

- Less odor control
- Often less preferred
- May be acceptable for some cats but not ideal for many



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#### Paper Pellets

- Low dust
- Often recommended post-surgery
- Texture can feel uncomfortable to some cats

#### Wood or Pine Pellets

- Natural odor control
- Strong scent may deter some cats
- Texture can be too firm for sensitive paws

#### Crystal / Silica Litter

- Excellent odor control
- Hard texture may be aversive
- Can feel uncomfortable underfoot

#### Key takeaway:

If a cat suddenly stops using the litter box, changing litter types may worsen the issue unless done gradually.

#### Litter Changes: Go Slow

When switching litter:

- Mix the new litter with the old
- Gradually increase the new type over 7-10 days
- Watch which box the cat chooses if multiple options are available (Change one box at a time)
- Choice builds confidence and prevents stress.



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## Litter Box Design Matters





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Cats can have strong preferences about how enclosed their litter box feels.

#### Open Litter Boxes

- Easy access
- Good visibility
- Preferred by many cats
- Ideal for seniors or mobility issues

#### Covered Litter Boxes

- Helps contain odor and litter
- Can feel safer for some cats
- ✗ Can trap smells
- ✗ Can feel threatening for others

#### Top-Entry Litter Boxes

- Reduces tracking
- Provides privacy
- ✗ Requires jumping
- ✗ Can be uncomfortable or intimidating

Important note:

A covered or top-entry box that feels “cozy” to us may feel like a trap to a cat, especially those with a history of stress or conflict.

#### Litter Box Placement: Location Is Everything

Avoid placing litter boxes:

- Near loud appliances
- In busy hallways
- Where cats can be cornered or surprised
- Far from the cat’s primary living space

#### Good locations:

- Quiet but accessible areas
- Multiple levels in multi-story homes
- Separate from food and water



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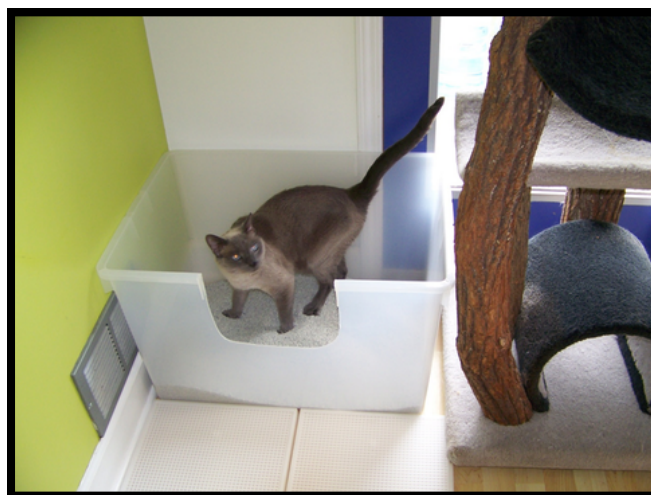
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## Multi-Cat Homes: Preventing Litter Box Conflict





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In multi-cat homes, litter box issues are often about resource guarding, not housetraining.

#### The Golden Rule

**One box per cat, plus one extra**

For example:

- 2 cats = 3 boxes
- 3 cats = 4 boxes

Additional tips:

- Place boxes in separate locations
- Avoid lining boxes up side-by-side
- Provide multiple escape routes
- Watch for blocking, staring, or ambushing

Cats may avoid a box simply because another cat makes it feel unsafe.

#### When a Cat Stops Using the Litter Box

If a previously reliable cat stops using the box:

##### Step 1: Rule Out Medical Causes

Pain, urinary issues, arthritis, or GI discomfort can all affect litter box use. A veterinary visit should always be the first step.

##### Step 2: Review Recent Changes

- New pets
- New furniture
- Schedule changes
- Litter or box changes
- Household stress

##### Step 3: Add, Don't Remove

- Add an additional box
- Offer a different litter texture
- Try an open box if using covered
- Try a low-entry box for senior cats

##### Step 4: Avoid Punishment

Never scold or punish a cat for accidents. This increases anxiety and often worsens the behavior.



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#### Senior Cats & Special Considerations

Senior cats may need:

- Lower-entry boxes
- Softer litter textures
- More frequent cleaning
- Boxes on every level of the home

Mobility issues can make previously acceptable setups suddenly uncomfortable.

#### Cleaning Matters

Cats are fastidious.

Best practices:

- Scoop daily (or more often)
- Fully change litter regularly
- Wash boxes with mild, unscented soap
- Avoid strong cleaners or perfumes

A clean box is one of the easiest ways to prevent issues.

#### The Big Picture

Litter box challenges are rarely about defiance. They are about **comfort, safety, access, and preference.**

With:

- The right litter
- The right box
- Thoughtful placement
- Adequate quantity
- Compassionate problem solving

Most litter box issues can be resolved successfully.

#### When to Call the Veterinarian

Litter box changes are sometimes behavioral — but they can also be a sign of underlying medical issues. A veterinary check should always be the first step when a cat's litter box habits change suddenly or significantly.



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#### Contact your veterinarian promptly if you notice:

- Straining to urinate or defecate
- Crying, vocalizing, or showing signs of pain in the litter box
- Frequent trips to the box with little or no output
- Blood in urine or stool
- Urinating outside the box while still attempting to use it
- Excessive licking of the genital area
- Sudden avoidance of the litter box after consistent use
- Accidents paired with changes in appetite, thirst, or energy

#### Urgent Note:

Urinary blockages — especially in male cats — are a medical emergency. If a cat is straining to urinate, producing little to no urine, or acting lethargic or distressed, seek veterinary care immediately.

#### Medical Conditions That Can Affect Litter Box Use

Some common medical contributors include:

- Urinary tract infections (UTIs)
- Feline idiopathic cystitis (FIC)
- Kidney disease
- Constipation or gastrointestinal discomfort
- Arthritis or mobility pain (especially in senior cats)
- Diabetes or thyroid conditions

Pain or discomfort can make a litter box feel unsafe or unpleasant, even if it was previously used without issue.

#### Behavior Support Starts After Medical Causes Are Ruled Out

Once medical concerns have been addressed or ruled out, environmental and behavior-based solutions are far more likely to succeed. Supporting a cat's physical comfort first allows training and management strategies to work without added stress.

Supporting cats in their litter box preferences helps protect their emotional wellbeing and keeps families together. Listening to what a cat is telling us — and responding thoughtfully — makes all the difference.