**Starting out right with your new cat and the litter box.**

Copyright 1999, Denver Dumb friends League. All rights reserved.

Most cats have a specific preference about where they want to eliminate. By following the suggestions outlined in this handout, you will be able to start off on the right foot with your new cat.

**Location**

Most people are inclined to place the litter box in an out of the way spot in order to minimize odor and loose particles of cat litter in the house. Often, the litter box ends up in the basement, sometimes next to an appliance and or a cold cement floor. This type of location can be undesirable from your cat’s point of view.

If you have a kitten or an older cat, she may not be able to get down the stairs in time to get to the litter box. Since she is new to the household, she might not remember where the litter box is. Your cat might be startled when using the litter box if a furnace, washer, or dryer suddenly comes on and that might be the last time she will risk such a frightening experience. If your cat likes to scratch the surface surrounding her litter box, she might find a cold cement floor more appealing.

Therefore, you might have to compromise. The litter box should be kept in a location that affords your cat some privacy, but also conveniently located. If you place the litter box in a closet or a bathroom, be sure the door is wedged open from both sides, in order to prevent her from being trapped in or out. Depending on where it’s located, you might consider cutting a hole in the closet door or adding a swinging door. If the litter box sits on a smooth, slick, cold surface put a throw rug underneath the litter box.

**Type of litter**

Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained litters, presumably because they have a softer feel. The new scoop-able litters usually have finer grains than the typical clay litter. However, high quality, dust free, clay litters are relatively small grained and may be perfectly acceptable for your cat. Potting soil also has a very soft texture, but is not very absorbent. If you suspect your cat has a history of spending time outdoors and is likely to eliminate in your house plants, you can try mixing some potting soil with the regular litter. Pellet type litters or those made from citrus peels are not recommended. Once you find a litter your cat likes, don’t change types or brands. Buying the least expensive litter or whatever brand happens to be on sale, could result in your cat not using the litter box.

Many cats are put off by the odor of scented or deodorant liners. For the same reason, it’s not a good idea to place a room deodorizer or air freshener near the litter box. A thin layer of baking soda placed at the bottom box will help absorb odors without repelling your cat. Odor shouldn’t be a problem if the litter box is kept clean. If you find the litter box offensive, your cat probably finds it even more offensive and won’t want to eliminate there.

**Number of litter boxes**

You should have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats. That way, none of them will ever be prevented from eliminating in the litter box because it’s already occupied. You might also consider placing them in several locations around the house, so that no one can “guard” the litter box area and prevent the other cats from accessing it. We also recommended that you place at least one box on each level of your house. It’s not possible to designate a personal litter box for each cat in your household. Cats will use any litter box that is available. Occasionally, a cat may refuse to use the litter box after another cat has used it. In this case, all of the litter boxes will need to be kept extremely clean and additional boxes might need to be added.

**To Cover or Not to Cover**

Some people prefer to use covered litter box, however, there are some potential problems with using this type of box. You might want to experiment by offering both types at first. Your cat can pick which he prefers.

**Potential problems**

* You may forget to clean the litter box as frequently as you should because the dirty litter is out of sight, out of mind.
* A cover litter box traps inside, so it will need frequent cleaning than an open one.
* A covered litter box may not allow a large cat sufficient room to turn around, scratch, dig or position herself in the way she wants.
* A covered litter box may also make it easier for another cat to lay in wait and “ambush” the user as she exits the box. On the other hand, a covered litter box may feel more private and might prefer this.

**Cleaning the Box**

To meet the needs of the most discriminating cat, feces should be scooped out of the litter box daily. How often do you change the litter depends on the number of cats you have, the number of litter boxes, and the type of you use. Twice a week is a general guideline for clay litter, but depending on the circumstances, you may need to change it every other day or once a week. If you scoop the litter daily, scoop-able litter can go two to three weeks before the litter needs to be changed. If you notice an odor or if much of the litter is wet or clumped, it’s time for a change. Don’t use strong smelling chemicals or cleaning products when washing the litter box, as it may cause your cat to avoid it. Washing with soap and water should be sufficient.

**Liners**

Some cats don’t mind having a liner in the box, while others do. Again, you may want to experiment to see if your cat is bothered by the liner. If you do use a liner, make sure it is anchored in place, so it can’t easily catch your cats claws.

**Litter Training Cats**

There is really no such thing as “litter training” a cat in the same way one would house train a dog. A cat doesn’t need to be taught what to do with the litter box. The only thing you need to do is provide an acceptable, accessible litter box, using the suggestions above. It’s not necessary to take your cat to the litter box and move her paws back and forth in the litter box, in fact , we don’t recommended it . This may actually be an unpleasant experience for your cat and is likely to initiate a negative association with the litter box.

**If Problems Develop**

If your cat begins to eliminate in areas other than the litter box, your first call should always be to your veterinarian. Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cats litter box habits. If your veterinarian determines that your cat is healthy, the cause may be behavioral. Most litter box behavior problems can be resolved by using behavior modification techniques. Punishment is not the answer. For long standing or complex situations, contact an animal behavior specialist who has experience working with cats.