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## **What Every Cat Owner Should Know About the Litter Box**

This handout contains information regarding the cat's domain; the litter box. Most cats are of a fastidious nature, thus there are important rules cat owners should follow. It is far easier to prevent an elimination problem than to cure one. Remember to **THINK LIKE A CAT**. They have a very keen sense of smell and although the box may appear clean and perfectly OK to us, it may not to the cat. Each and every cat is different and has specific preferences about where they chose to eliminate. House soiling is the most common problem with cats and the number one reason why many cats are relinquished to animal shelters throughout the country.

### **Rule # 1: Location of the litter box**

Most people, for good reason, want the litter box in an out-of-the-way location. Often that means the litter box ends up in the basement, utility room, bathroom, or a room most people do not use on a regular basis. This type of location could be undesirable for your cat for many reasons.

Kittens may not be able to go all the way to Siberia to use the box. They are still learning to use the box and may find out too late that they need to use one. If this is a new kitten or a new environment for a grown cat they may not remember where it is located, especially if it is in an area seldom frequented. Also, as a cat ages he may not be able to make it all the way down the steps and over the high sides of the box before he decides it's too much trouble. The cat may be startled while in the box. This is a very private moment for cats. If a washer changes cycles, a dog runs past from outside, or water falls on his head from a shower, this may become such a frightening experience that he decides to find a more suitable place to eliminate.

You will need to change your perspective and make compromises. The litter box should be an area which provides some privacy, but an area that is frequently visited by you. Any room with a litter box should **always** remain open (no closed doors). Try to have a swinging door or cut a hole for easy access.

Also make sure that the litter box isn't too close to the cat's food, water or sleeping area. Make sure the location isn't too noisy or too busy. Could there be potential surprise

attacks by other cats in the household, dogs or small children? This could trap the cat because of the one way exit.

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### Rule # 2: Type of Litter Box

Most of the commercial litter boxes are for people and not cats. They are too small, too shallow, and have lingering odors. Some cats are big or overweight and need bigger boxes so they don't have to try for 15 minutes to get comfortable. Plastic storage boxes offer more space than regular litter boxes and can be less expensive. Replace litter boxes annually. No matter how much you may clean them, urine reacts to plastic and changes the odor. Cats are better at detecting odors and will find them offensive before people will. Covered and hooded litter boxes offer security, but could potentially be too confining or hide the view of an ambush by a resident cat. These types of boxes trap odors and the cat has to hold its breath while relieving itself. A covered litter box may be of benefit to a small, timid cat that prefers complete privacy. Upgrade kittens to larger boxes as they grow into adulthood.

### Rule # 3: Number of Litter Boxes

The general rule is to have one litter box for every cat in the household. Some experts even advocate an extra box as well. This means if you have one cat, she needs two litter boxes. If you have five cats, there needs to be six litter boxes. There are many reasons for this rule. This will ensure that if one box is occupied, there will be plenty of other options for elimination. Place the boxes in different levels and locations throughout your home. Also, there will be less opportunity for a litter box to be guarded by the dominant cat. Cats occasionally can be extremely territorial about their litter box and refuse to use it because another cat had just used it.

### Rule #4: Cleaning the Litter Box

The average household cleans the litter box once a week. How would you like to use a toilet that was flushed once a week? These creatures are discriminate. To meet their needs the box should be scooped out 1-2 times a day. This is more frequent than owners care to do, but remember, you are thinking like a cat rather than like a person. The entire litter should be changed 1-2 times a week and the boxes cleaned with hot water and liquid soap only. Other cleaning products like ammonia and bleach can make the odor even worse for cats. If your cat is eliminating by the box, she is trying to tell you that he would like to use the box but he is repelled by the conditions of it.

Most cats will use litter that is less than two inches deep. People tend to think that if more litter is used they will have to clean the box less often. Not so, cats can smell odors trapped below the litter. Most cats have their own likes and dislikes but the majority of cats prefer NON-SCENTED, CLUMPING LITTER. Some cats are repelled by litter that has additives or perfumes. Once again these are more for the benefit of the owner and

not the cat. Fifty percent of cats will stop using the litter if the brand is changed, so try to stay consistent. You may need to use an assortment of litters and have your cat pick which one is suitable.

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#### Rule # 5: NO Punishment

Owners can go crazy after finding a puddle or a pile somewhere in the house. They usually grab the cat and force them into the litter box. Cats hate to be forced to do anything and now may associate the litter box with unpleasant experiences. This is not very effective and now your cat may feel threatened, insecure and stressed. Right at the start, praise and reward your cat whenever you see her using her box. Use this practice on a regular basis from kitten-hood to the senior years. You can use small treats, cat nip, or verbal praising. Never take good behavior for granted. Cats learn best by rewarding good behavior.