

Understanding a cat's toileting behaviours



Cats typically pee and poo away from where they eat, drink, and rest. They will generally seek out quiet locations with a soft surface, such as dirt or sand and will pass urine and faeces in separate locations, rarely returning to the same spot twice. Most cats dig before and after they pee and poo, but some may not.

What is urine and faecal marking?

Urine marking (sometimes called urine spraying) and faecal marking (sometimes called middening) are often used as a way for cats to communicate:

- Un-desexed cats (both male and female) deliberately urine-mark important locations to tell other cats that they are healthy and ready to mate.
- However, *all cats* (both desexed and un-desexed) can urine-mark for many other reasons.
- Cats try to avoid conflict with other cats (as fighting may result in injury), so leaving chemical messages via urine is an effective way for them to pass on information without having to be near one another.
- Urine marking may also help cats feel safer, as the chemical messages left behind may alert them to potential danger.



Toileting vs. Marking

Cats toilet to remove waste. They mark to communicate. These behaviours often look different and occur for different reasons.

Toileting	Urine Marking
<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Cats usually squat when they toilet.→ They often produce a larger amount of urine.→ They often choose flat surfaces (like litter, carpet, bedding, or soil).→ Most cats scratch or dig before and after.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Cats usually stand tall with their tail raised and quivering, often treading with their back feet.→ They may produce a smaller amount of urine.→ They often target vertical surfaces (walls, doors, furniture).→ They usually don't dig or scratch afterwards.→ Most cats still use their litter box for toileting.

Toileting often looks like this:



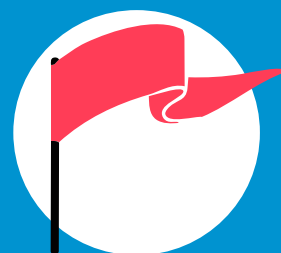
Urine marking often looks like this:



Toileting	Urine Marking
<p>Problems can arise when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Cats don't like their litter trays or where they are placed→ There are not enough litter trays→ Cats don't like their cat litter→ Litter trays are unclean→ Cats are sick or unwell→ Cats feel stressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Cats don't get along with other cats→ There are changes in the home (new furniture or items, new pets, visitors)→ Cats are sick or unwell→ Cats feel stressed

If your cat dislikes their litter box, you might notice:

- Not entering the box fully.
- Scratching at the box edges or nearby walls.
- Not covering their waste.
- They may urinate or defecate right next to their tray.



Prevention is key

A little planning can help prevent stress and unwanted toileting or marking behaviours. Here's how to help your cat feel comfortable in their home.

1. Set your cat up for success

Most cats find moving to a new home a little stressful, which may lead to the onset of unwanted toileting and marking behaviours. To reduce the chance of this occurring and to help your cat adjust to their new home:

- Start by confining them to a **quiet, secure room** (like a spare bedroom or study).
- Make sure this space has **all essentials**: food, water, litter trays, hiding spots, and scratching posts.
- Keep them in this area until they're **comfortable and using the litter tray consistently**.
- Gradually give access to the rest of the home, but **leave one litter tray in the original spot** for familiarity.

2. Make litter trays 'cat-friendly'

Most cats naturally prefer soft surfaces where they can dig and bury their waste. If your cat doesn't like the litter tray or where it is placed, they may choose to toilet elsewhere.

How many trays should I provide?

- **One cat = two trays** in separate locations.
- **Multiple cats = one tray per cat, plus one extra**, all in different spots.

What type of tray is best?

- Bigger is better! Most store-bought trays are too small and are designed to appeal to humans rather than cats' preferences. Litter trays should be at least 1.5 times the length of the cat.
- Avoid covered or automatic 'self-cleaning' trays—they trap odours and limit a cat's ability to keep watch. Cats are predators and prey so they like to stay on the lookout for danger when they are doing something that might make them more vulnerable to a predator, like going to the toilet!
- **Below are four great examples of 'cat-friendly' litter boxes:**



Large storage boxes converted into litter trays by cutting an entry/exit point.



A large underbed storage tub used as a litter tray



61 X 45 x 25cm

This commercial litter box is relatively large compared to others on the market



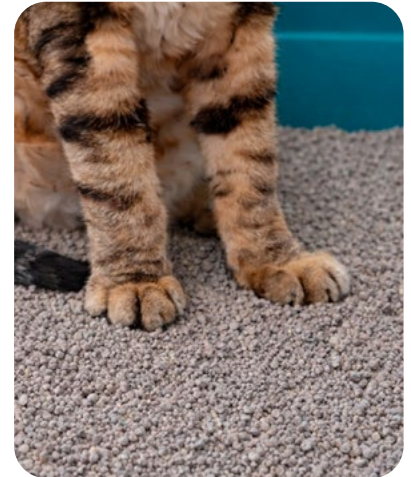
This storage tub from Kmart is a great option for elderly cats or those with mobility issues, as the entry/exit point is very low.

Where should trays go?

- Quiet, easy-to-access spots.
- Not next to food, water, resting spots or noisy appliances.
- Do not place litter trays next to one another. In multi-cat homes, this can create or increase conflict.
- In multi-level homes, place at least one tray on each level.
- Keep trays in areas away from dogs or young children (baby gates or pet gates with cat doors may help create 'cat-only' areas).

What litter should I use?

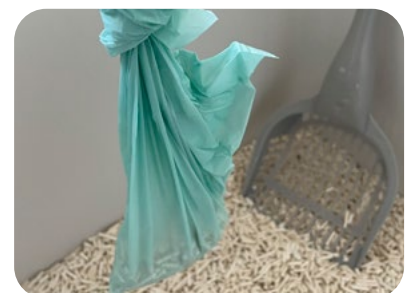
- Cats prefer **soft, sand-like, unscented litter** that is about **3 cm deep**.
- 'Cat-friendly' choices: softwood clumping litter (e.g., Catlux), unscented tofu clumping litter, clay, sand, or soil.
- If you know what litter your cat used before, start with that. You can provide another type of litter in a different tray to see which they prefer.
- Any changes to a cat's litter should occur very gradually.
- Avoid scented litter, litter deodorisers, hard pellets, crystals, and plastic tray liners.



Tip! Cats that toilet outside may find it easier to use a litter tray inside if soil is used as the litter to start with.

How often should I clean the trays?

- Scoop **at least twice daily** or sooner for cats with health issues that cause them to toilet more frequently. Treat each litter box like a toilet; once used, it should be flushed; the same goes for a litter box; once used, scoop!
- Once scooped, top up litter to maintain a depth of 3cm.
- **Replace all litter** within every litter box **weekly or every two weeks**. **However, some may need to be replaced sooner.**
- Clean trays with **hot water and mild, unscented soap**—avoid harsh chemicals.



Tip! Use eco-friendly dog poop bags to easily discard soiled litter after each scoop!

3. Optimise your cat's environment

The environment a cat lives in influences their health and behaviour. Meeting a cat's environmental needs is essential to minimise stress and reduce the chance of unwanted behaviours.

- Offer **multiple safe hiding spots** and essential resources in separate locations.
- Provide opportunities for them to **play and express hunting behaviours**.
- Let cats choose when and how to interact with you.
- Consider using **synthetic pheromones** (like Feliway) to make the home feel safer.

For more details, check out this helpful guide:

[ISFM Environmental Needs Guidelines](#)



If your cat toilets or marks outside their trays

- If you notice any concerns or changes in your cat's toileting habits, contact your vet promptly, as medical issues can cause or contribute to the onset.
- Clean soiled areas with an **enzymatic cleaner** (avoid ammonia-based products).
- Record details for your vet:
 - ↳ When it started
 - ↳ Where and on what surfaces
 - ↳ Time of day
 - ↳ Possible triggers
 - ↳ What litter trays and litter substrates you've provided
 - ↳ Anything you've tried to manage the unwanted behaviour
- Photos or videos can help your vet assess the issue.
- **Never attempt to 'punish' your cat**—it will cause stress which can have a significant impact on their wellbeing and could worsen, or lead to the development of, other unwanted behaviours.
- Your vet may refer you to a **feline behaviour consultant or veterinary behaviourist**.



Support



- ↳ This information is only intended as a guide. If you have concerns, please contact our RSPCA NSW Behaviour Team mail@rspcansw.org.au or a veterinary behaviourist.