

Points on Pets: Cat refuses to share litter box

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: Since we acquired a new kitten a few weeks ago, our 4-year-old spayed cat has stopped using her litter box. We have tried several brands of litter. We only own one litter box since we live in a small house. We were hoping that the older cat would help us train the new kitten to use the box. But now the new kitten is using the box and the old cat is not.

How can we get our old cat to use the box again?

A: Refusal to use the litter box is one of the most common behavioral problems reported in cats. Most cats are fussy about their litter boxes and do not adjust well to new odors. Most cats that defecate outside cover their holes. This decreases the level of offensive odor created by their bowel movements.

Trying to replicate the outdoors inside for some cats is difficult. Litter boxes used by more than one cat often have bad odors. Many cats find these odors offensive and do not want to go near the litter box. Therefore, your problem might be solved by changing the litter more often or by providing multiple litter boxes so that your cats do not have to share.

Because cats are creatures of habit, it is common for an older cat to quit using its litter box if the brand of litter is changed or if the box acquires new smells, such as those created by an additional cat. Whenever a new brand of litter is used, it should be gradually introduced by mixing increasing amounts of it into the old litter over a period of time.

Stress can cause some cats to quit using their litter boxes. Adding a new kitten to your household and changing the brand of litter could both cause stress for your old cat. Providing a couple of litter boxes, keeping the boxes extremely clean, making gradual changes in the brands of litter and minimizing stress will often prevent or correct behavioral problems related to litter boxes.

Your veterinarian can give you additional advice regarding your older cat's refusal to use her litter box.

Q: We have been careful to not allow our dogs to chew on small bones or bones that splinter easily. However, our cat occasionally catches a weak bird and eats it, bones and all.

Why does this not cause her problems?

A: Most cats do eat the bones of the birds and small rodents that they catch without any problems. In contrast to dogs which usually bolt their food down rapidly, most cats carefully chew their food before swallowing it. This grinds the bones into very small pieces which usually do not cause any problems; however, the bones of fish should not be fed to cats or dogs.

Other than the occasional cat with a chicken bone stuck on a tooth, veterinarians seldom see cats because of eating bones.

Write to Pets, P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112-0190. Only questions of general interest will be answered in this column.

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