

▶ GET A CAT'S EYE VIEW of a house's trouble spots at [humansociety.org/allanimals](http://humansociety.org/allanimals).

Perimeter spraying on items such as drapes and vents could be your cat's way of letting outside felines know they're encroaching on his territory. Cats who miss their humans sometimes favor shoes and other personal items.

## LITTER-LY SPEAKING

When your cat boycotts the litter box, he's trying to tell you something

text by ARNA COHEN ■ illustrations by CHAD THOMPSON

**Actions speak louder** than words, goes the old saying. And no action speaks louder than the one your cat performs outside the litter box.

Cats are hardwired to bury their waste. When your kitty forgoes this basic instinct, he's letting you know that something is wrong in his world.

But while that something may be obvious from a cat's viewpoint, to humans it can be utterly obscure. As a result, inappropriate elimination is one of the most common reasons cats are surrendered to animal shelters.

Romeo had been returned to a shelter twice by the time Caroline Golon of Columbus, Ohio, adopted the 2-year-old from a Persian rescue group. The group had

no information on why he'd been given up, but within five months, Golon had a suspicion. "If there's something soft on the floor, he'll pee on it," she says. "... We lived ... in a place with wall-to-wall carpeting. ... He'd target corners and we'd cover those up with plastic, then he'd find someplace else. Pretty soon the whole upstairs was covered in plastic."

Golon took Romeo to the veterinarian to check for a medical issue, always the first step in digging into the cause of litter box avoidance. Inflammation, infection, or obstruction in the urinary tract makes urination painful—a blockage can even cause a fatal buildup of toxins—while constipation can cause uncomfortable bowel movements. Associating the pain with the litter

box, your cat may stop using it, even urinating right in front of you to tell you he's not well. Quick treatment is essential to relieve his pain and get him back in the box.

Romeo got a clean bill of health, so Golon had to look elsewhere. Her search for answers turned up a plethora of theories and advice—so much that she eventually launched *thehappy litterbox.com* blog to share information with cat owners in similar predicaments. "Every cat is different; every situation is different," she says. "It's a lot of trial and error in finding a solution."

As Golon discovered in her research, some cats are wedded to their bathroom routine and hate any alterations. A healthy cat who starts eliminating outside the box may be unhappy about the shape, size,

location, cleanliness, or amount or type of litter. To resolve the problem, you need to give your kitty what he wants (see sidebar for tips).

If health or preference isn't the answer, it's time to get inside kitty's head. More than likely, he's stressed with a capital S.

"Just like with people, stress ... impacts emotional health," says Amy Shojai, a certified animal behavior consultant in Sherman, Texas. Cats thrive on routine, and changes in their environment—a new person in the household, even a different furniture arrangement—can cause anxiety. Some cats cope by using "self-scent" to comfort themselves, says Shojai. "What smells like kitty? Her pee and poop."

A cat who pees on the drapes may be reacting to the sight and smell of strange cats outside, marking his territory to reassure himself. If he marks your bed or a personal item, he may be anxious and confused because your new job has you away from home for long hours. "[Your cat] is not mad at you and acting out," Shojai says. "He's trying to calm himself down by sharing that scent in a place that feels safe and comfortable for him. ... It's kind of a backhanded compliment."

Even so, Josh Rodgers and Amy Briggs didn't feel particularly flattered when their cat Charley, then 3, started urinating on the carpet a few months after they adopted her. They hadn't made any changes to the litter box, and the vet didn't find any physical

## CHECKING ALL THE BOXES

For the best chance of litter box success, consider what your cat wants, not what's most convenient for you, recommends certified animal behavior consultant Amy Shojai.

► **DON'T BOX ME IN:** The bigger the box, the better. It should be large enough and the sides high enough that your kitty's rear end doesn't hang out. Kittens and arthritic or disabled cats do best with low-sided boxes or one with an opening cut into the end for easy access. Since cats feel vulnerable in the box and prefer an unobstructed view to watch for threats, your kitty may refuse to use an enclosed box. Hoods also keep in odor, which can offend a cat's sensitive olfactory system.

► **LITTER LAW:** Use a litter that your cat likes. Many prefer the finer texture of clumping litter over pellet or "pearl" litters, and clumping litter helps keep the box clean, but if your cat prefers something else, go with it. Keep in mind that while you may appreciate a perfumed litter, some cats dislike it.

► **CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO CATLINESS:** Scoop the box every day or your cat may avoid it entirely. Replace nonclumping litter completely at least once a week and clumping litter about every two weeks. Wash boxes with hot water and mild dish detergent (bleach and ammonia can leave a kitty-repelling scent).

► **MAGIC NUMBER:** Provide one box for every cat in your household plus one extra. This helps keep each box cleaner and reduces competition. Prevent territorial behavior by placing the boxes in different rooms.

► **PLEASE DON'T DISTURB:** Give kitty privacy by placing litter boxes in quiet, low-traffic areas. The laundry room isn't ideal, since the noises frighten some cats and heat intensifies litter box odors.

► **BE UNDERSTANDING:** Never punish your cat by hitting, yelling, or "rubbing his nose in it." You'll only teach him to fear you and the litter box.



Eliminating in the sink or bathtub or on tile floor could signal urinary tract or bowel issues: Kitty tries to find a place to go where it won't hurt and is drawn to smooth, cool surfaces.



cause. All paws pointed to stress in the form of the couple's younger cat, Sushi.

The Frederick, Md., couple had adopted the 1-year-old cat a few months after getting Charley. Sushi quickly asserted her dominance in the household, bopping the two dogs in the face, chasing the timid Charley from chairs and windowsills, and as her owners later discovered, preventing the older cat from using the litter box.

The solution was simple: more litter boxes in different locations. Since Sushi couldn't guard every box at all times, Charley's inappropriate elimination stopped almost immediately. While Rodgers wasn't thrilled to have litter boxes in every room and hallway, he was eventually able to

reduce the number of boxes to three. The couple also moved into a house with hardwood floors, eliminating the temptation of carpet. "We were confident that we could make it work or find a happy balance," says Rodgers.

For Golon, the quest to make Romeo a reliable litter box visitor continues. Having ruled out the usual suspects, she's planning to hire a behaviorist to get to the root of the problem. In the meantime, she puts puppy pads and towels inside Romeo's boxes, and she and her husband are careful to never leave clothing on the floor.

The sacrifices, she says, are worth it. "We'd rather have Romeo than area rugs."