

My Pet Has Issues!
by Amy B. Wallis, Ph.D.

My friend has a cat who “potties” outside of the litter box. How can I make sure my cat doesn’t do this, and what can I do if she does?

Unfortunately, many cats are surrendered to shelters and ultimately euthanized because they don’t use the litter box reliably. The shame of it is that this problem is often solved through simple steps. First, it is important to create the right environment so your cat does not develop litter box problems, and second, every cat owner needs to be ready to help their cat overcome these problems if they do develop.

Both wild and domestic cats have preferences with regard to how, when, and where they eliminate. Many of these preferences have reasonable explanations in the wild; for example, cats urinate on soft ground to maximize absorption and minimize odor. In our homes, we need to pay close attention to our cat’s elimination preferences to prevent issues from arising. For example, most cats prefer a very clean litter box, and many will not use a litter box that is not cleaned daily. Further, many cats have surface preferences, meaning that they prefer to use a clay litter, or newspaper, or sand. Some cats will not use a box that has a strong odor, even an odor that humans find appealing, such as air freshener or scented litter. Other preferences relate to covered vs. uncovered boxes, and many cats are fearful of “self-cleaning” boxes, while others adjust very well. Generally, research shows that cats are most happy with unscented, sand-like litter that is kept clean on a daily basis in an uncovered litter box.

If your cat stops using the litter box after using it successfully for some period of time, her preferences may have changed. Experimenting with different litters by setting up multiple boxes with different surface styles is the best way to assess your cat’s needs; a thorough examination by your veterinarian is also warranted, as health problems can often cause changes in elimination behavior.

One option that is guaranteed NOT to work is punishment, such as yelling, squirting with water, or forcing the cat into the box. These will usually worsen the issue by creating negative associations with the litter box area so the cat wants to stay away rather than use the box.

Once medical issues are ruled out and changes in the litter do not solve the problem, an animal behavior consultant can help provide a more in-depth analysis of the cat’s behavior and create a treatment plan to solve the problem.

Dr. Amy Wallis is a Radisson resident and an animal behavior consultant providing behavior consultations to dog and cat guardians throughout central New York. If there is

an issue you would like to see addressed in this column, contact her at amy@mypethasissues.com or learn more on her website: www.mypethasissues.com.