

# Ask the Vet

Dr. Cecilia Ho



Dr. Cecilia Ho is a graduate of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Michigan State University. She decided to specialize in feline medicine two years into private practice as she found feline medicine to be more challenging and rewarding.

She currently shares her home with five cats- all of which have her trained to their beck and call. And yes, she scoops constantly and tirelessly daily from all of her litterboxes!

**Q** What can I do to correct my cat's litterbox habits?

**A** Cats have changed little since the first domesticated feline crept out of the woods and into our homes. However, as our life styles have changed so have those of our cats. The majority of cats nowadays live their entire lives safely indoors, greatly increasing their lifespan. However, their loss of freedom translates into a greater dependence on us, as their caretakers. Paramount among those needs is the litterbox.

Behavioral issues relating to the use or, lack thereof, of the litterbox, remain the top reason why cats are surrendered at shelters. The concept of a litterbox would appear to be very simple. All you need is some sort of container, some substrate to absorb the waste material and some way of removing said material. However, a visit to any pet store will reveal a mind-boggling, dazzling array of litterbox pans, litter and all the associated paraphernalia. Unfortunately, the large majority of these products were developed and marketed with people in mind instead of cats.

**Here are a few tips for providing the ideal litterbox environment**

The rule of thumb for the number of litterboxes is to provide one litterbox per cat *plus* one extra. This ensures there are sufficient litterboxes for all the cats in the household. Some cats adamantly refuse to use a box if it has already been soiled by another cat. Also place litterboxes at each level of a home. In multi cat households, some of the more dominant cats will guard access to the litterboxes causing the more timid cats to soil inappropriately elsewhere rather than risk antagonizing the aggressive cat. Older cats with arthritis or medical issues that lead them to urinate more often and in larger volumes and need to have quick, easy access to their litterboxes.

It is good idea to use the largest litterbox possible that will fit into the space allotted for it. An open, unhooded litterbox is best. Hooded litterboxes reduce the interior space for the cat to maneuver and also trap odors within that small space, hides clumps of urine and feces from view, making it easier to ignore scooping and cleaning out the box. It is *critically* important to scoop and clean at least once daily, preferably twice. Cats are fastidious creatures and if given a choice will soil in a clean area. Scooping daily encourages the cat to continue using the litterbox. Placement of the litterbox is also key, It is recommended that a litterbox be placed in an area that is quiet and receives little foot traffic.

**The different types of litter available nowadays is truly astounding**

Unfortunately a large number of these litters cater to human sensibilities rather than the cat. A study funded by the Cornell Feline Health Center emphatically proved that the type of litter most preferred by cats is unscented, clumps readily and is very fine and soft to the touch. Clumping litter was vastly preferred over regular, clay litter, is easier to clean and allows all of the waste material to be removed when scooped, leaving the remainder clean.

*Hopefully these tips will help you establish a litterbox routine that keeps you and your cat coexisting happily. When in doubt about a certain product, discuss it first with your veterinarian before subjecting your cat to changes that may be detrimental to its continued use of its litterbox.*

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