

# HOUSE TRAINING: USING THE LITTER TRAY

## **Do I need to train my new kitten to use a litter tray?**

Cats in the wild use a soil type surface for elimination. By providing a litter tray with an appropriate and appealing substrate, most cats do not need to be trained to use it. At about 30-36 days of age kittens leave the nest and find a loose substrate for elimination. The kitten may learn specific area and substrate preferences by observation of its mother. Kittens dig in the substrate and bury their stools and urine.

## **Is there anything that I need to do to aid this process?**

Initially it is important that the kitten be confined to a small area with an appropriate sized litter tray. This allows you to take advantage of a cat's tendency to eliminate in a loose material. As long as the litter is the only loose substrate available, and especially if it is the same type of substrate as that used in its previous home, very little effort should be required to litter tray train the kitten. About the only other indoor area that might appeal to a number of cats is the soil around houseplants. Ensuring that the cat is prevented from getting into houseplants, except when you are around to supervise, should deal with this problem. Kittens will need to eliminate after they eat, after they wake up and after play. At those times place the kitten in its litter tray and praise her for elimination. A kitten does not need to be confined continuously, but should be supervised to prevent accidents and brought back frequently to the appropriate elimination location.

## **What type of litter material should I use?**

There are many types of litter materials available today. These include fine "clumping" litters, wood pellet types, recycled newspapers and many others. Some have materials added to control odour. The type you choose is up to you but in general the finer the substrate the more acceptable it will be for the cat. Since the kitten will start eliminating first by following the cues of the queen, continuing with the same litter as used in the first home is helpful.

## **What size and type of litter tray should I buy?**

Initially, the size of the litter tray should be determined by the size of the kitten or cat. A very small kitten may need a tray with shorter sides for easier access. As the kitten grows, a larger tray may be more appropriate. Some owners prefer litter trays with covers on them. This is acceptable if it is acceptable to the cat. You need to be sure that the cat can negotiate the opening by stepping into it and that the cat is not too large to fit into the opening.

## **Where should I put the litter tray?**

The litter tray should be placed in a location that is easily accessed by the cat, yet out of the way. Try to avoid congested household areas. The cat should have some privacy and quiet where it eliminates. Laundry and furnace rooms are often used, but be sure that noise from household equipment is not disruptive and aversive to your cat. Try to put the litter tray in an area that is convenient for you to check on and keep clean. Do not put food and water bowls right next to the litter tray. If there are dogs in the home, then the litter tray should be located where the cat can eliminate without being bothered by them.

## **How often should I clean the litter tray?**

One of the most important factors in continued litter tray usage by house cats is cleanliness. Cats are very fastidious animals, and spend time each day making sure their coat, feet and face are clean. One can assume that they would like a clean place to eliminate. The number of cats in the home and litter usage determines the time between litter cleaning. Faecal material should be removed at least on a daily basis, whether the litter material type is clumping or plain. Clumping materials need to be cleared of urine soiled patches more frequently than other material types. Ideally soiled patches should be removed as soon as they are noticed. Manufacturers will provide a guide but each cat is an individual, your cat may like more frequent cleaning of the litter tray to maintain good usage patterns. Some cats dislike the odour of the litter and so it may be preferable to start with a scent free litter. A similar problem can arise with the cleansers used to clean litter trays, and so the tray should be rinsed thoroughly after each complete cleaning. Do not use ammonia based cleaners, as these are often quite aversive to cats. The whole tray should be cleaned and rinsed on a weekly basis.

## **How many litter trays do I need in my home?**

The number of litter trays needed depends on the number of cats, the size of the home, the temperament of the cat, and the presence of other pets in the home. When there are multiple cats, multiple trays should be available in different locations, not all side-by-side in one place. Because there can be varied interactions between individuals, multiple trays in multiple locations allow housemates to avoid one another if necessary. Even for only one cat, two trays may be appropriate depending on the layout of the home and the individual preferences of the cat. Some cats prefer one tray for urine and one for stool. In general, there should be at least one litter tray per cat, and some behaviour advisers advise one more tray than the number of cats in the house.

## **What if the kitten does not use its litter tray?**

Should the kitten begin to eliminate in locations other than its litter tray, first review the steps above. Is the litter tray in an area that is appealing and easily accessed by the cat? Is there anything in the area that may be a deterrent? Is the litter tray being cleaned often enough? Are there enough litter trays for the number of cats? To determine the most appealing litter for your cat, offer two or more different litters in the same type of tray, side-by-side and see which one, if any, the cat uses most frequently. Next, determine the type of litter tray the cat prefers by offering two or more litter tray types side-by-side (each with the preferred type of litter). You can determine the cat's preferred location by offering the preferred litter tray with the preferred litter in two or more locations and determining which one, if any, the cat uses more frequently. If litter tray problems persist, additional guidance and perhaps a behaviour consultation might be required.