



Crate Training for Your Cat

Litter box avoidance is the most common behavioral problem veterinarians and behaviorists address in behavioral consults, so remember you are not alone. The most important thing to keep in mind when solving litter box avoidance with your cat is patience. There are so many factors that can affect your cat's litter box use that it often just takes time to find out what is deterring her from using the litter box. Now that you've eliminated any potential illnesses, tried changing the type of litter, type of box and location, among others, you're ready to try the 30-day Crate Training Method. Crate training is difficult, especially since we are so attached to our pets, and is usually the last step before behavioral medications. Below are instructions to crate training your cat in order to re-teach her how to use the litter box. Oftentimes, unwanted behaviors go on for so long, our pets "forget" the appropriate behavior. Remember, be patient and encourage good behavior in your cat—do not punish her as anxiety can only heighten the problem. She needs your love and understanding in helping her get through this learning period.

The Crate

Getting the crate is the first step. Traditional wire dog crates (common sizes sufficient for crate training your cat are 30L x 21w x 24h and 36L x 24w x 27h). You want them to have enough room to hold a small bed and large litter box, not much more than that. Make sure the crate has a bottom tray to contain that litter.

Set up the crate in a quiet room in your house with not a lot of foot traffic. The bedroom is a great place for her new crate because she can be close to you, which can ease her anxiety that may be the root of the inappropriate elimination.

Cover the entire bottom tray with her preferred cat litter. Using an attractive litter like *CatAttract* that uses pheromones to encourage your cat to use it is best, but any unscented clumping litter is sufficient (non-clumping litter may deter your cat because urine can spread out rather than stay contained in one spot). Place a small, comfortable bed for her in the rear of the crate. Beds with waterproof lining and/or removable cover are best in case she has an accident because it can be removed and washed.

Obtain food and water bowls that can be mounted on the sides of the crate. Your local pet store employees can help you find these. Mount the bowls close to the crate door so you can reach them and make sure they are up off the floor of the crate.

Training

Now for the hard part: keeping your cat in the crate for the next 30 days. This is much more difficult for you as the owner because you feel guilty, as if you are punishing your cat, but don't worry. She won't hate you and it will feel much longer for you than for her. As long as you follow the procedure, your cat will recover quickly after the 30-day training period and your bond will remain in tact.



When you first introduce her to the crate, give her a tasty meal to enjoy during her first experience in the crate. A tasty can of wet food or treat of tuna is a great choice for her. For the first two weeks of training, your cat's activities are restricted to the crate. You can still play with her—dangling a feather or ribbon through the wires can be an exciting game and stimulate her during this period—but her access to the outside should be limited. The only time she can come out is when you are cleaning her crate and feeding her. Maintain a clean environment in the crate at all times. Part of her initial avoidance may be related to a dirty litter box, so you need to teach her that the litter box is a clean, fresh smelling environment. (No one wants to use a dirty bathroom; your cat doesn't want to use a dirty litter box!) While you are cleaning, it is very important to keep an eye on your cat, so keep the door to the room closed. Any sign of a potential accident (excessively sniffing one area, scratching) and she needs to go back in the crate immediately. Make sure you give her a lot of affection and a treat for her good behavior outside her crate, but return her to the crate once you are done cleaning.

Beginning the second week, clean the entire tray of litter and place a litter box inside the crate with your cat. Ideally, the box should have low sides so she can easily climb in and out of the box. As always, keep the box as clean as possible. If you'd like to start with a cookie sheet filled with litter instead of a standard litter box, this is also ok. Some cats, especially those with arthritis or even anxiety, are intimidated by the larger sides of the litter boxes.

Starting the third week, she can come out of the crate only under supervision and in the one room her crate is in. Keep a close watch because you want her to succeed. Let her out several times a day to interact with and groom her. These are important stimulating and bonding activities for her. They also calm her and reward her for good behavior outside the crate. Place a litter box in a quiet corner of the room so she has another option outside the crate.

The fourth week, your cat can spend the majority of her time outside the crate and exploring around the house, but you still must supervise her. This should be a calm, transitional week back into the big world that is your house. Make your home a tranquil environment for her. She should stay in the crate when no one is home or when you are sleeping.

The fifth week of the training period, your cat no longer has to spend time in her crate. She instead will be confined to the same room she has been in, but she can remain out when you are not home and at night. Keep multiple litter boxes in the room so she has a lot to choose from—this also helps if you tend to be out of the house for many hours of the day, the boxes don't get dirty as quickly.



Litter Box Tips

- Litter boxes should never be in high traffic areas—quiet locations are ideal.
- Do not place litter boxes near areas other pets inhabit (i.e. dogs, small animal crates, other cat's "territory"). The smells or activity in these areas may be a deterrent.
- Do not place litter boxes near electrical outlets or heavy wiring. Research shows cats are very sensitive to electrical fields and this may be contributing to the avoidance.
- Using CatAttract or Feliway may aid in creating a calming environment in and around the litter box.
- Do not disturb your cat or create loud noises while she is successfully using her box—once she is outside her box, soothe her with a soft voice and praise her with affection and/or treats.
- There should be one litter box per cat in your household PLUS one.
- Litter should be scooped multiple times per day and the entire box should be cleaned when necessary. If you only have one cat, you do not need to clean the entire box as much—her own scent often attracts her to voiding in the same location.
- Open litter boxes are ideal—closed/covered litter boxes can trap smells or be intimidating to anxious or sensitive cats. If you must have a covered litter box, begin with an open one and gradually transition her to a covered litter box (I can provide you with tips for introducing covered litter boxes into your cat's routine.)