

Easy Clean-Ups for Pet Messes

Dr. Marty Becker's Guide for Pet-Lovers

**Tips and secrets
for dealing with
pet messes, odor
and shedding!**



By Dr. Marty Becker

Cleaning Up Pet Messes

While my sense of smell isn't anything like a dog's (and I hope I don't smell like one, either), it is perhaps more keen than many other people's — and that's both good and bad. On the bad side, I can't abide strong, offensive odors (including those that come from sharing my life with pets). On the good side, my nose helps me with my work, since identifying odors is one of a veterinarian's best diagnostic tools, letting us detect diabetes by sniffing out ketones on the breath, or identify a yeast infection in the ears from 30 paces.



I don't own my own veterinary practice anymore, but I still love to work as a veterinarian when I'm not being one in the media. The two practices where I work are as dedicated as I am to what I call a "smell neutral" environment: fresh, clean hospitals that smell neither like pet odors nor like cleaning products.

It probably won't surprise you that my wife and I work hard to make sure our home is also "smell neutral." Being a TV vet doesn't mean our pets won't vomit, have loose stool, or shed like hairy hand grenades. It doesn't matter if you're a celebrity or a Jane Doe; pets mean messes.

Over the years, I've picked up a lot of tricks and cleaned up a lot of messes, and since I know pet mess in general is the top complaint of pet lovers, I want to share the secrets of a smell-conscious veterinarian.

While products may vary — I am always on the lookout for better, more effective and faster ways to "keep it clean" — the steps to an odor-free home when you live with pets remain the same. In our family, we wouldn't trade our pets for a clean home no matter how much you gave us. But fortunately, using the tricks of the veterinary trade, we don't have to. And you don't either, with these tips on cleaning up pet messes and keeping your home odor-, stain- and fur-free.

How many times have you looked at an open house or vacant apartment and known that pet lovers lived there before you dropped in? Even though the place may be empty, the carpets carefully vacuumed and free of pet hair, the smell lingers — and nothing you can spray in the air will override it for long. (Picture a cartoon character putting a clothes pin on their nose in a desperate attempt to block the bad odors.) But I've also been in homes where you can't tell pets were part of the family.

The difference in many cases is time. When a pet makes a mess, time is not on your side. Don't neglect the daily duties: When your cat uses the litter box or your dog goes in the yard, scoop and toss right away. This not only reduces odors, but can protect against certain diseases that can be transmitted from animals to people.



There's a reason why real-estate agents ask their clients to send their pets to live with friends or relatives when a house is for sale: the presence of pets can bring down the value and the perception of a house because they often cause greater wear and tear on a property than a coat of paint can hide. But even if you don't care about that, you probably don't want to live in a dog house. You don't want to replace or reupholster furniture frequently, and you don't want to spend your leisure time mopping up messes.

Keeping pet messes down saves money and time

My wife and I deny our dogs nothing—they have a bigger share of our bed than I do, and that's the doggone truth. But we also love a clean, comfortable house. Don't care about that? Keep it nice for your dogs as pets that live in a cleaner house have far fewer skin problems! Some tips:

Keep it covered. One sure way to keep your house neat is to choose washable surfaces whenever possible.

If you're making big choices—like for furniture or flooring—pick surfaces that are scratch-resistant and easy to wipe clean. Tile and vinyl flooring are pet-friendly, as is furniture upholstered in leather or microfiber. Steer clear of natural fabrics in furniture, decorations, and rugs. Nothing absorbs the scent of a pet and holds it better or longer than wool or cotton. Synthetic fibers repel scents and stains much better.

No matter what flooring or furniture you have, it'll stay cleaner and last longer if you make use of covers. Throws and slipcovers are terrific aids. Choose washable materials only, then put them through the laundry once a week or even more often. This is easier by far than trying to clean the surface of a chair or a couch.

Throw rugs are a pet owner's best friend. Secure them with double-sided tape and



use them anywhere you have heavy pet traffic, including over existing carpets. Rugs are much more easily cleaned than carpets, especially those that fit in high-capacity front-load washers, and they're also much less costly to replace when they get stained or worn out.

Washable mats can waylay a great deal of a dog's mud, muck, drool, and general mess and keep it from the rest of your house. Put mats both inside and outside the doors your dog uses to catch as much dirt and grime as possible as he goes by. Also place a mat beneath your pet's food and water dishes to keep spillage and droolage under control.

Brush, comb and clip. Shedding is one of the biggest of all pet-owner pet peeves. However much we love our furry friends, we'd prefer to keep their fur on them and off us—which means off our clothes, our furniture and carpets, our floors, and the upholstery in the car.

Your pet is going to shed a given amount of fur in an average day, week, month or year. Fortunately, you can help keep the flying fur under control with a number of proven solutions. Since all pets are going to shed, you want them to shed at a time and place of your choosing. The portion of that fur that ends up on your furniture and floors pretty much depends on how much of it you comb, brush, and wash off somewhere else.

By taking your pet to a place of your choosing, such as outdoors or the garage, and using a tool like the FURminator to brush out as much loose coat as possible, you'll drastically cut back on the amount of hair your dog will shed in the next several days.



I also like a product called the Kong Zoom Groom, which really digs out loose hair and can be used either dry or during a bath. A one-minute daily outdoor brushing for heavy-shedding dogs in the summer or in a garage or easily cleaned room in the winter can save you an hour of housework.

Keeping long-haired pets cut short will lessen the volume of shed fur and provide less refuge for odors.

If you have a double-coated or short-haired dog or cat, you're in for his lifetime of shedding. If you want to reduce shedding the next time you get a pet, choose a small, long-haired dog and keep the fur clipped short. Long-haired dogs lose hair less frequently than short-haired ones—true! And you may laugh, but putting clothes on your dog such as T-shirts or bodysuits can also keep shedding down. It may well be worth the smirks from others if someone in your family has allergies.

Simple tips to keep it clean

Assemble your supplies. You'll always want to have an enzymatic cleanser on hand. Buy a large bottle if you have a very young pet — or an old one — because accidents happen. The enzymes in these cleaners attack the components of pet waste, neutralizing odors along the way (but be sure to follow the instructions to avoid any damage to rugs or carpets).

You'll also want bleach (dilute one half cup of bleach to a gallon of water; it's a fantastic disinfectant) to clean up wet messes, and baby wipes to wipe down your pet. Since pet odors start with pets themselves, make sure you have pet shampoo, both regular and no-water varieties (your veterinarian can recommend a good one). Save battered towels for pet duty, and have other regular cleaning tools on hand. I like those designed with pet mess in mind, such as Swiffer-type floor cleaners, and vacuums and spot-scrubbers, such as those made by Bissell.



Get into a clean routine. Regular cleaning, especially of areas where your pet likes to spend most of his time, will keep smells from building up and digging in. Wash pet bedding often (weekly is ideal), and sweep, Swiffer or vacuum a couple of times a week or more. And don't

forget to make time for a regular deep cleaning. Hire someone or rent power equipment, but get in there deep and get it truly clean.



Bathing your dog weekly — yes, I said weekly — with a shampoo formulated for pets will not only keep him cleaner and better smelling but it will almost certainly help with some skin problems. Bathing your dog weekly is fine. Forget that old nonsense about waiting for months—yuck! Frequent bathing cuts

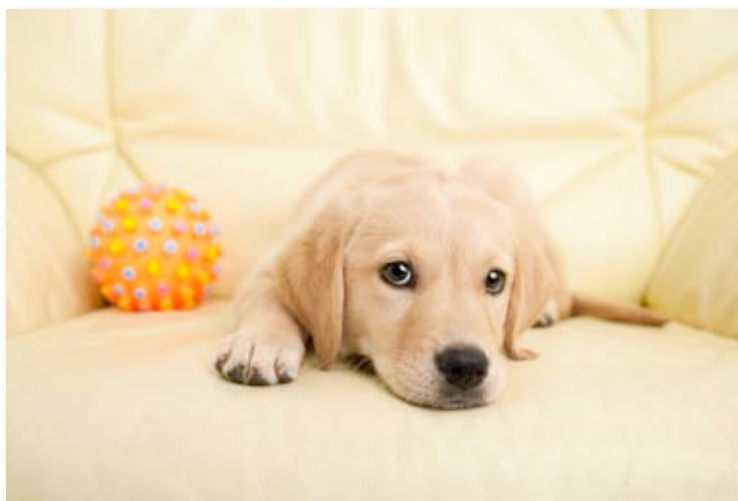
down on the need for heavy cleaning since a clean dog is less likely to muck up his whole environment, much less put his own health and that of his human family (who might have allergies or asthma) at risk. For in-between clean, swipe your pet with an unscented baby wipe. (Bonus: This may help your own allergies, too.)

Use an electrostatic sheet to mop and dust. The advent of electrostatically charged products like the Swiffer is a gift to pet owners everywhere. These sheets attract lint, dust, and pollen and hold onto them. By quickly picking up all those small particles, you not only keep a cleaner house, but you keep that debris off your pet.

Considering that many long-haired low-to-the-ground breeds are not unlike Swiffers themselves— gathering dust and dirt with their coats as they move through the house—getting this stuff out of your pet’s way will not only help keep your house clean, it will help prevent your pet from picking up dust that will make you sneeze. Even for pets that have a lot of ground clearance, all dogs lay down on the floor and gather whatever rests on the surface. I sometimes call pets Four-Legged-Swiffers or Furry Dust Mops. Remember what isn’t on the floor --- because of routine cleaning --- can’t hitchhike a ride on the pet and cause problems.

Suck it up. Don’t forget the benefits of a powerful vacuum. Some companies—notably Dyson, Bissell, Eureka, and Dirt Devil—are so aware of the need for routine pet cleanups that they have models designed for and marketed to pet owners that clean pet debris off floors and upholstery easier and better. (And remember: vacuums are great as part of flea control.)

Keep pet paraphernalia and toys clean. Nothing spreads drool around the house better than your dog’s beloved squeaky toys. It almost seems like they were designed to add slime to household surfaces. Many dishes (especially durable stainless steel), toys (such as those made of hard plastic or Kongs) and food puzzles can be run right through the dishwasher. Hot water and soap work on most everything else, and soft toys can be washed and dried just like the rest of your laundry.



For equipment such as crates, scrub, then rinse with a half cup of bleach mixed with a couple of gallons of water, and let air dry. Better yet, to clean dishes, kennels, and runs, ask your vet for a small size of Nolvasan. This chlorhexidine cleaner used by almost every veterinary practice is pleasant-smelling but powerful.

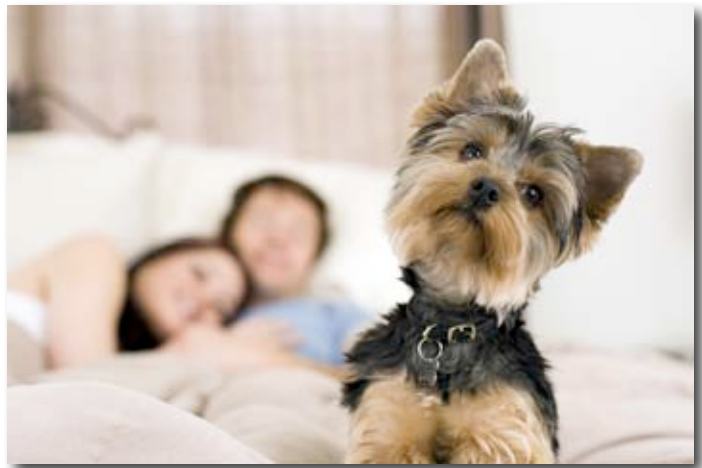
Don’t wait for a mess to dig in. The longer a pet mess sits, the more difficult it will be to completely eradicate the smell. Get on it immediately: Pick up what you can, blot off the liquid elements, then get the enzymatic cleaner working. If you can’t clean right away, spray water to keep the problem area moist. Since you want the enzymatic cleaner to have its best chance, apply as directed (always, always read directions!), and then keep the area moist longer by covering carpet with plastic wrap and putting a heavy book over the spot. Be very liberal with how much cleaner you apply, as while the spot may be small on top, down below the carpet the source of the odor can cover an area ten times as large. Make a schedule for routine, preventive cleaning to help prevent the buildup of mess and odors.

Getting past the smell of cleaners

With the right tools and the right cleaning products, the pet smells you're waging war on will soon be waving the white flag of surrender (until next time, that is). Now, how to get rid of the smell of cleaners? Rinse, rinse and rinse some more. Water takes everything away, both the remains of the mess and the products that vanquished it. Run your rags through the washer and toss one-use products, such as electrostatic wipes, in the trash. What's that smell? Nothing!

Accidents in the house

Of course, no matter what you do, there will be occasional messes in your home, from one end of your pet to the other, or occasionally from both at once. House-training accidents, hairballs, and bouts of vomiting or diarrhea from an illness are all things that every pet owner faces at least a few times over the years.



Puppies and dogs will return to the scene of a pee or poop “crime” because it smells like a place to go. To them, this area has become the de facto toilet. Even if you clean up all visible signs of the mess—and think that the odor is gone, too—enough scent may remain to keep the new area attractive to your dog. Keeping on top of messes isn't hard, but it is essential to house-training and to cleaning in general. What you need to know:

Don't use ammonia-based cleaners. They smell like urine to a puppy because ammonia is a by-product of decomposing urine (ever noticed how baby diapers smell like ammonia?). So instead of making the area smell clean, ammonia products make a mess site seem even more attractive. Left on his own to interpret this particular chemical smell, your dog might come to the unfortunate conclusion that he has discovered a convenient new potty place.

You may have heard that club soda works on stains, but it doesn't do anything to remove odor. Save it for mixing drinks or removing red wine stains.

Instead, use products designed for pet mess cleanup. These liquid products contain enzymes that break down the waste and neutralize odor. In other words, they don't just mask odors, like those images on a PacMan game they gobble them up, remove them, and then break down organic wastes so they don't leave stains. These products are perfect for cleaning up house-

soiling accidents and often yield better results than all-purpose cleaners. Nature's Miracle is one such product, as is Anti-Icky-Poo. (Any pet supply store will carry these brands, and others.)

Whatever you choose, use lots: the wet spot on top of the carpet can be the size of a quarter, but the plume under the carpet pad can be the size of a dinner plate—and your pet can smell it, even if you can't.

Stain and odor removal

Clean up the area as soon as possible. Do this before the mess has a chance to soak through to carpet padding, where getting the smell out is very hard. Once the urine soaks through, you have to pull up the carpet to ensure that the area is truly clean.



To clean up a spot where a puppy has urinated, use some old towels to soak up as much of the urine as possible (as a pet owner, you'll want to keep a supply of old towels for just such cleanup throughout your pet's life). Soak the stain with the cleaning product. This is a case where more is better. Then place a clean, dry towel over the spot and weight it down with several heavy books. The pressure will help wick the wetness from the carpet. After 24 hours, the area should be mostly dry, and you can remove the books and towel. Voila! The area is odor- and stain-free.

For poop, mud, hairballs or other solid messes, use a towel or plastic bag to pick up as much of the mess as possible. Use damp paper towels to lift off any excess poop or dirt that clings to the carpet. Then spray the area well with your enzymatic cleaner, being sure to cover a larger area than that of the actual accident. Using a clean towel (not one of your good ones, of course), scrub the area until the stain is gone. As described above, use another clean, dry towel to thoroughly blot the area, then weight it with something heavy and let it dry for 24 hours.

Whatever you do, don't procrastinate, and don't skimp on the amount of cleaner. If your dog has a house-soiling accident, if his muddy paws track through, or if your cat vomits up dinner or digs a bunch of dirt out of your houseplants, don't wait to start the cleanup.

Carpets get first cleaning priority, as they can be permanently stained by almost any soiling agent that's left sitting on them. Even wood and tile floors, though, fare better if you clean them up right away. Keep cleaning supplies stocked and ready, and be sure to jump on a muddy pawprint—or any pet mess—before it can set.

You're not done yet. It's always a good idea to search for and destroy old stains. Even if you can't smell anything, old stains may still have a lingering odor that can attract your puppy.

Remember: dogs have been trained to sniff out explosives, termites, bed bugs, mold, truffles, and accelerants in arson cases. Their sensitive sniffers don't have any problem finding every spot that has ever been soiled.

Pet supply stores offer black lights that show old messes that you may not be able to see with the naked eye. Veterinarians and trainers sometimes have these available for rent. (Warning: Prepare to be shocked at how many toilets your pet has been frequenting right under your nose.) Cleaning products that contain mess-eating enzymes—all pet supply stores carry them—will work best for removing old stains, but you may need to treat the area a couple of times for best effectiveness.

Once your puppy is completely house-trained, you'll most likely want to have your carpets professionally cleaned, but if you are diligent during the training period, you're unlikely to have any permanent stains. Keep cleanup supplies on hand, though, because accidents and illnesses can occur throughout your dog's life. You've been sick as a grown-up, right? Your pet is the same. Mess happens.

The fur factor



One of the best things about living with a cat is stroking his soft, beautiful fur, and watching him rise up to meet your hand and purr loudly. Whether he has the kinky coat of a Cornish Rex, the long, straight coat of the Persian, or the short, thick coat of the typical domestic shorthair, a cat's fur is a pleasure to touch.

The luxurious coat of the cat is made up of hairs that are produced by cells beneath the skin called follicles. A follicle consists of a hair bulb—where the hair originates—and a follicular sheath. The hair passes through the sheath to emerge at the skin's surface. Cats have up to three types of hairs, and the type of coat they have depends on variations in the

size and numbers of those hairs.

Guard hairs are the first line of defense against cold and wetness and help to protect the skin from injury. Coarse, thick and straight, they taper to a fine tip. More insulation and protection is provided by wiry, mid-length awn hairs. The undercoat is made up of downy soft secondary hairs. Up close, they look crimped or rippled. The secondary hairs, which are the most numerous of the three types, help to regulate the cat's body temperature.

Dog fur is similar. Dogs have compound hair follicles that produce bundles of 7 to 15 hairs. Usually, each follicle contains one long, stiff guard hair that is surrounded by underhairs with a finer texture. Different breeds of dogs have different numbers of hairs. The density of hairs per square inch determines how much a dog will shed.

The messy truth about pets is that short-haired or long-haired, they all shed. Sometimes it seems that more of their fur is on our clothing and furniture than it is on them! It's true that some dogs and cats shed less than others, but even "naked" animals such as the Sphynx cat or the Chinese Crested dog leave sparse, fine hairs in their wake. The related belief that some cats such as the Rex breeds won't trigger allergies? Not true. They might cause a less potent allergic reaction, but all dogs and cats produce saliva, urine and dander (dead skin flakes), which are the real sources of allergens, not fur.

Fur fighters

You can still live happily with a dog or cat if you're the allergic type. And you can live with a pet if you're the fussy housekeeper type. Most people can live with pet allergies, with the help of an allergist (the human kind), and most people can reduce the amount of fur they find on their floors, furniture and clothing. The same basic techniques can help to keep sneezes, sniffles and flying fur under control.

Wipe the pet's coat daily with a damp towel or large disposable scent-free wipes. This helps to keep the coat free of dander. If you're highly allergic, assign this task to someone in the family who isn't allergic to the cat or dog, or if that's not possible, hire someone to do it. You can also wear a surgical mask, which you can get at any drugstore.

Brush the pet weekly or even daily to remove dead hairs that will otherwise float off the animal and onto your belongings.

Wipe or groom the pet outdoors, reducing the amount of fur found indoors.

Get a sticky tape-roller from your dry cleaner or try a product such as the Pledge Fabric Sweeper for Pet Hair.

Bathe your pet regularly. Even cats. I know; you've heard all your life that cats hate water, but if you acquire your kitten at an early enough age, you can teach him to become accustomed to



and even enjoy bath time. Honest! And you don't have to lather kitty: for cats, rinsing is enough. Ask your veterinarian to recommend shampoos, conditioners or wipes that are appropriate for your pet's skin or coat type. If your cat struggles while being bathed, you can use a product called Clipnosis, which clips on a fold of skin on the cat's neck. The sensation painlessly mimics momma cat packing them from nest to nest, and puts them in a semi-paralytic, hypnotic state.

Vacuum frequently. Use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter, which traps very small particles, such as cat dander. This is another job for a person without allergies. If you can't pawn off this chore on another family member or a housekeeper, wear a face mask while you vacuum, as well as when you groom the cat.

Purchase a HEPA air filter or air purifier. Cat allergen is very light, small and sticky, so it floats more than other allergens, making it more likely to be trapped by the filter. If you only have dogs, a HEPA filter won't help as much.

Keep over-the-counter antihistamines on hand. Liquid formulas work fastest, followed by the chewable type. For severe allergies, ask your allergist about prescription antihistamines and decongestants. Medications that can help include nasal sprays, topical steroid sprays and eye drops. A pet-friendly allergist can help you find a combination that works best based on your symptoms and sensitivities.

Reduce the surfaces that can trap allergens. Leather or vinyl furniture is better than fabric, and wood or tile floors are better than carpet. Use washable throw rugs, and launder your bedding in hot water.

Invest in kitty and canine couture. No, I'm not kidding. Dressing your pet in a t-shirt, sweater or body suit helps to keep your home a fur-free zone. If you introduce your pet to the furry fashionista lifestyle while she's young, she'll soon come to expect getting dressed as a regular part of the day. And since your pet is wearing clothing at home, no one will know unless you tell them. It will be our little secret.



The benefits of keeping your home fur-free

At our Almost Heaven Ranch, we have floors that are all wood (walnut) or tile, with a few area rugs for comfort and contrast. While we deep clean the house top to bottom once a week,

about every other day we use a Swiffer. Every time I slap one of those electrostatically-charged pads onto the extended handle and start cruising around the floors, I'm amazed at how it attracts the dog hair (I call our dogs "hairy hand grenades that explode in furry shrapnel" or the "furry jack-in-the-boxes that spring up with hair flying!"), picks up dust and dander, even the grass they track in.

What I can't see is the pollen and spores that are also on the pad. We have a large house, and when I switch pads, I'm grossed out by the composition and quantity of yucky gunk that's trapped on the pad, and almost feel like I want to wear gloves to take it off and toss it into the trash.

Pets are basically Swiffers with four legs. Everything that's on the floor is also on them, and the more you use a Swiffer, the less dirt, dander, pollen and spores get on them. The less that gets on their skin and coat, the fewer skin problems they'll have fewer problems with atopy (an allergic skin reaction) or environmental allergies.

Environmental allergies manifest themselves by pets face-rubbing, licking or chewing their feet or paws, or licking, chewing and scratching other parts of the body, plus chronic ear or anal gland problems. Skin problems are the number one reason people take their pets to the veterinarian, and environmental allergies are one of the most common causes of skin problems.

By using Swiffer products routinely, cleaning with a vacuum that has a HEPA filter and bathing dogs weekly, you'll keep your pet healthy and comfortable with a shiny, huggable coat, and save trips to the veterinarian.

Hucking out hairballs

Trichobezoar. That's the official term for a hairball, which isn't really ball-shaped at all but rather is more of an oblong mass of swallowed hair and gummy mucous. In all the world, few things are more disgusting to step on in your bare feet at 2 a.m., which is why your cat always puts them where you cannot miss the mess. (Who says cats don't have a sense of humor?)

The cat's barbed tongue is what makes hairballs pretty much inevitable. The tiny hooks pull out loose fur when a cat grooms, and the direction of the barbs means it's easier for the cat to swallow the hair than to spit it out. Later, that hair comes back up in the familiar "ack, ack, blech" sound of a cat hacking up a hairball.



It's normal for cats to cough up hairballs every now and then. You can keep the incidence down—and save your carpets from staining—by grooming your cat regularly to remove loose hair before it's swallowed and by upping your cat's fiber intake by adding a little canned pumpkin to his food or feeding a hairball formula food.

Other sources of odor and stains



The best thing about cats is that they use a litter box. The worst thing about cats is that they use a litter box. While a litter box is convenient, the stuff that's deposited inside it is pretty stinky. That's because cats are carnivores. They eat meat, and the result is that their waste stinks. There's just no way around it.

Thinking inside the box

The litter box, that is. The feline propensity to use a litter box has both advantages and disadvantages. The good news is that there's no house-training required. The bad news is that keeping a litter box clean and up to a cat's high standards is not always the most pleasant of jobs. When cat box cleaning is done well, however, even the most scent-sensitive of guests may be hard-pressed to locate it.

Why cats cover up

Cats are the ultimate predators, but they can also be prey, and they've got the self-protection racket down pat. Covering up feces and urine helps to conceal their presence from larger, more dangerous animals who might want to make a meal of them or simply kill them to eliminate a competitor.

This inborn habit is one of the many great things about cats: it means they are hard-wired to keep their living area clean. There's no training involved in teaching kittens to use a litter box; they know instinctively to dig in a soil-like substance before going to the bathroom, and most have already learned from their mother to hide feces and urine by burying them in a litter box.

Litter laws

When cats are good about using their litter box, they're very, very good. But when they're bad, well, let's just say it's not pleasant. Luckily, good management habits on your part can prevent or solve most problems and keep you and your cat living in sweet-smelling harmony.

Litter box types and fillers

Choosing the right litter box and type of litter is the most important shopping decision you can make. House-soiling is the number-one behavior problem people report in cats. When your cat doesn't like the location, smell, size, or any other aspect of his bathroom, he won't hesitate to let you know just what he thinks—by urinating and defecating outside the box. And don't think that maybe his aim was just a little off. Cats are precise when it comes to directing their urine and feces, and when it's out of the box, they are leaving a stinky but succinct message: I don't like the state of my bathroom. Here's how to keep your cat thinking inside the box.

You can find all kinds of litter boxes at pet supply stores and online. There's the basic rectangular, uncovered box; hooded boxes with hinged tops for easy scooping; boxes with sifters lifting out solid waste; and even automated boxes that remove waste after every use. At least one, the Cat Genie, hooks up to your water line and automatically cleans the box after every use. Now that's service! I prefer an inexpensive uncovered box, myself, one that I can toss every six months and replace with a new one, but if you don't want your cat to scatter litter everywhere, a covered box may be a better choice for you.

It doesn't really matter, though, what I like or what you like. What's important is what your cat likes. People like covered boxes because they help contain odor and could be considered more attractive to look at. Cats, on the other hand, may or may not like covered boxes. Some appreciate them for the privacy aspect, while others prefer to have a 360-degree view so they can be aware of any approaching threats. Whose opinion matters most here? Not yours. If you want your cat to use the litter box on a regular basis, his wishes should take precedence.

Give your cat a choice—covered and uncovered—and watch how he approaches each box. If there's a lid, does he hesitate before entering? Try taking it off and see if he goes into the box more readily. If you absolutely must have a covered box, try adding a cover later, or purchase an open box that comes with a high, clear shield that fits around the sides. Your cat can still see out, but the litter mess is a whole lot less.

Not too big, not too small, but just right

One more thing. When it comes to litter boxes, size matters, and most litter boxes are too small, like the one on the photo. The box should be big enough for your cat to stand up and turn around inside it. For a kitten, you don't want a box that is so large that it's difficult to get in and out of. You might need to put a step in front of it to help the kitten get in. And as the kitten grows, you want to make sure the size of the box increases as



needed, especially if you have one of the larger cats like a Maine Coon or a Bengal. You don't want him to have to scrunch up to use the box. If he does, he might just decide that it's easier to defecate outside the box. A good rule of paw is that a litter box should be one and a half to two times longer than the cat's body.

How long is that? Measure your cat from the tip of his nose to the base of his tail—heck, throw in the length of the tail for good measure. If your cat is 21 inches long, his litter box should be at least 32 inches long. That gives him enough space to turn around in the box and dig. If you can't find a commercial litter box that's an appropriate size, look for a litter box made for dogs weighing up to 35 pounds or purchase a plastic sweater box from a discount or home design store.

Sometimes a box is too big. You may have chosen a box that your kitten can grow into, but if he's too little to climb into it easily, he won't use it. Old cats or those who are on the tubby side can have a similar problem with high-sided boxes.

How many boxes and where should they go?

One box is not enough. You should have one box for each cat, plus one. If you have one cat, you need two litter boxes. Two cats, three litter boxes. Put them in different locations; for instance, one upstairs and one downstairs. That way, one is always convenient. And with more than one cat, it prevents fights over who gets to use which box when. Some cats like to ambush others when they use the litter box, so place litter boxes in locations with easy escape routes. Privacy

is important, too. Cats don't want to pee or poop next to each other any more than you'd want to do so with somebody right next to you. Another good reason to have multiple litter boxes: Each cat may prefer a different type of litter.



Types of litter

What about what goes inside the box? There are all kinds of different cat litter, and they all have pros and cons. Most cats prefer clumping litter because of its soft, sandy feel. It's easy on the paws and easy to scoop. Other cats might like a fine-grained clay litter. Look for one that comes in

a dust-free formula. Some cat litter is easy on the earth, made from recycled paper or natural substances like corn cobs or wheat.

Avoid scented litter. It might smell good to you, but that perfumey odor can be sensory overload for a cat. Using scented litter can be one of the quickest ways to teach your cat to go outside the litter box.

Start with what your kitten or cat is already used to, but if you plan to change litters, give him a choice. I like to get small containers of three different kinds of litter: clumping, non-clumping and one of the alternative-type litters like Feline Pine, Yesterday's News or Swheat Scoop. Fill each box a half-inch deep with a different litter. Put them side by side so it's like "Let's Make a Deal." It's usually obvious that the cat prefers one litter over the others. Donate the litter that's left over to your local humane society.

It's also a good idea to test what depth of litter your cat prefers: one-quarter-inch, a half inch or three-quarters of an inch full. Some cats like it mounded in the middle; others like it spread out. Some cats like to be able to scratch the bottom of the box, so the less litter the better as far as they're concerned. Others don't want their tootsies to touch anything but litter and prefer a deeply filled box. The more personalized you can make your cat's litter box, the better he'll like it.

Drawing the line at liners

Litter liners can perturb certain cats. Often cats don't like the feel of plastic beneath their paws. If you're having an issue with your cat or kitten not using the litter box, a plastic liner may be the culprit. Remove it to see if it improves the situation.

Litter box maintenance

Whatever type of box you choose, you can't, can't, can't let it get dirty. Cats have a keen sense of smell, better than dogs! You know how you feel about using a filthy public restroom? Well, cats feel the same way about dirty litter boxes, times a thousand.

Scoop the box every time you see that it's been used. Think of your own bathroom. Would you be okay with flushing the toilet only once a day or, worse, once a week?

You also need to wash the litter box. Yes, I said "wash" the litter box. One of the main reasons cats pee or poop outside the litter box is because it stinks. A dirty litter box not only stinks up your house, it's also suspected of being a factor when cats develop idiopathic—meaning there's no known cause—cystitis, a painful urinary tract infection.

Every two weeks, dump out the litter, clean the box with warm water and a mild, unscented dishwashing detergent, and fill it with new litter. If that isn't good enough for your finicky feline, you may need to clean the box and change the litter weekly. Trust me: you and your cat will be happier, and your house won't have that lingering eau de feline.



Plastics retain odors, even when they're cleaned, so I like to replace the box every six months. If you hate the thought of throwing plastic into the landfill twice a year, try using a large enameled turkey roasting pan instead. It's a good size, it's just as easy to clean, and smells won't cling to the metal. Wash it every week or two, the same way you would a plastic litter box.

If you really hate scooping and are a dedicated cat owner, try out one of the new automated litter boxes (you'll still need to clean it) or even consider teaching your cat to use the toilet. It can be done! And if your cat is super talented, maybe you can even teach him to flush when he's finished.

Toilet training. Fur real.



Serious about toilet-training Snowflake? Go to the Internet. You will find at least half a dozen videos of cats perched on a toilet seat, their faces a model of life-or-death concentration as they squat precariously on the edge, the way other cats would in a litter box.

That said, cats don't care if they spray on the seat. As far as I'm concerned, that is reason enough not to share a toilet with a cat (unless you have a powder room

you're willing to dedicate to his use).

So. Cats. Toilets. Possible? Sure. Likely? Probably not. The position is just too precarious and uncomfortable for most cats to be willing to do it on a regular basis. In my opinion, you should be very, very happy if your cat uses the litter box without fail—and leave it at that.

Not feline fine

If you're doing everything right and your cat is refusing to use the litter box, she may be trying to tell you something—namely, that she has a health problem such as a urinary tract infection. If you've ever had one yourself, you know how painful UTIs can be. Your cat may be trying to tell you in the only way she knows how that a visit to the vet is in order.

It's not medical, so what is it?

What if you've taken your cat to the veterinarian and he has a clean bill of health? When infection, inflammation, pain, or other physical causes are not an issue, the two main motivations for a cat's refusal to use the litter box are toileting, meaning the cat has decided he

would prefer to use the bathroom elsewhere, thank you very much, or marking, the feline form of communication.

Marking, also known as spraying, is most common in unneutered cats—an excellent reason to have your Tom or Kate Kitten altered at a young age—but it can also result from tension between cats in the household or because the cat is having relationship problems with other pets or people in the family.

How can you tell the difference between toileting and marking issues? The number-one clue is the location of the urine. If the urine is on the floor or some other horizontal surface, especially if the cat is standing or squatting to urinate, he has a toileting issue. Most often, it means he doesn't like the location or cleanliness of the litter box.

Urine sprayed onto a vertical surface such as a wall or door is a sign of scent marking, or territorial marking. Most cats who mark vertically don't have a medical problem. You can almost always chalk the behavior up to a cat's desire to communicate something, either to you or to other cats in the home. Cat pee is designed to stick on trees in all weather for as long as three weeks, so it's powerful stuff. When your cat uses it to send a message, you know he's serious about what he's saying.

Don't ever tell yourself that he just missed the box. Cats can direct their urine very accurately, so the pee is exactly where they want it to be and smells exactly how they want it to smell. Someday, we will be able to identify the particular pheromone that the cat leaves with the urine and that will tell us if he is scared, frustrated, terrorized by another cat, or in pain. Until then, we have to do a little detective work to sort out the problem.

Another clue is the state of the litter box. If you are really good about scooping it daily and keeping it clean, but your cat is still urinating or defecating inappropriately, chances are that he or she is marking. If the box more closely resembles the state of one of those portable toilets on a hot afternoon in a stadium filled with thousands of people, well, I think you can probably chalk the problem up to a toileting issue.

Solving toileting problems

So what can you do? You have one litter box per cat, plus one extra. You've placed the litter box in a private area with an escape route from other pets and no unexpected noises. You have at least one litter box on each level of your home. You're sure that the box is the right size. Even if you think you're doing everything right, cats will sometimes start going outside the litter box. That's when you have to dig a little deeper to discover the root of the problem.

Start with easy solutions. Clean the litter box more frequently, move the box to an area the cat seems to prefer, or add another box. You may even want to create a litter box cafeteria, giving your cat a choice of box styles and litter types. It's possible that his preferences have changed. For instance, if your cat has started peeing on the carpet, he may be trying to tell you that he'd

like a litter that's more absorbent or one that has a softer feel beneath his paws. Offer him a fine, sandy, scoopable litter. You may have chosen a particular type or brand because of its cost or for environmental reasons, but cats like what they like. Be willing to defer to your cat's preferences, even if they aren't as "green" or as cost-effective as you'd like. He's not going to change his mind no matter how many times you tell him a particular type of litter is less expensive or more environmentally friendly.

Tone down the smell. Scented litter might appeal to you, but for most cats it's a turnoff. Try an unscented variety and see if that solves the problem.



I know it's hard to imagine, but you can try too hard to cover up the smell of a litter box. Go easy on air fresheners and potpourri. Sometimes they can mask odors a little too thoroughly, so much so that your cat can't find the litter box. Instead, to kill odors, use an enzyme breakdown product such as Anti-Icky Poo to clean areas where your cat has urinated or sprayed inappropriately. If you scoop the box often, change the litter and clean the box regularly, odor shouldn't be an issue.

Go deep. Experiment with the depth of the litter. Most cats like it to be about one and half inches deep, but your cat might like a little more or a little less. If your cat is urinating on a hard, smooth surface, try changing the distribution of the litter in the box. Put a thin layer of litter at one end and leave the other end empty. Placing the box on a floor with a hard surface may also help.

Clean up your act. Scoop the box every time you see that your cat has used it, or at least twice a day. Cats can be a lot more finicky than your mother-in-law when it comes to having a clean bathroom. If your cat is peeing right next to the litter box, the message he's sending may be that it stinks so much he doesn't want to get into it. When you see a nasty stall in a public restroom, don't you move on to one that's cleaner? Cats are the same way. They need a small amount of odor to attract them back to the litter box, but too much is overwhelming and sends them off in search of a new spot. Here's a rule of paw: If you can smell the litter box, it's too smelly for your cat.

Location, location, location. Make sure the box is really in a place that your cat approves. If your cat is urinating and defecating in the same general area as the box, just not in it, or in an area where the box was previously located, she may be hinting around that she'd like you to move it. Try to meet her request if possible. There are any number of reasons your cat might not like the location, from privacy to protection to noise level.

Cats have a strong sense of privacy when it comes to elimination habits. Just as you wouldn't like having someone walk in on you in the bathroom, neither does your cat. When cats are

urinating and defecating, they need to feel secure in the knowledge that nothing scary will interrupt them. They're not fans of cave-like locations—too easy to be ambushed on the way out—so they may dislike covered litter boxes or a box that is placed in a cabinet or closet.

They can feel threatened if the litter box is placed in an area without any escape route, one that has a lot of foot traffic from other family members, including other dogs and cats, or one that is likely to have unexpected noises or activity.

You might think the laundry room is a great place for the litter box, but your cat may have an entirely different opinion on the matter. Laundry rooms tend to be noisy, and they don't necessarily have an escape route if your dog sticks his head in to see if there are any "snacks" in the box or the twins run in to pull their soccer uniforms out of the dryer. And if the dryer buzzer goes off at a crucial moment and scares the heck out of the cat, that may be the last time he goes near that litter box.

What about the garage or basement? They're pretty good as far as privacy goes, although a garage door opening unexpectedly could put a scare into a cat. But because they're usually far from living areas, young cats may not always remember how to get to them at first or may not be able to make it all the way before they have to go. This is also an issue for aging cats with arthritic joints. And some cats like to leave their mark by making scratching motions in the area surrounding the litter box. Pawing on concrete might not be their cup of tea.

If possible, try placing the box in a little-used guest bathroom. A bathroom is ideal because you can scoop the waste right into the toilet and flush it away as long as you're using flushable litter, and it's likely to have a cabinet where you can store bags or boxes of litter. Just be sure the door is always open so your cat can enter and exit easily.

Whatever you do, don't place the litter box in the same area where your kitten or cat eats and drinks. Cats are fussy about cleanliness and would never dream of using the bathroom in the same place where they eat.



Stop spraying

If you ever come home to find that your cat has peed on your pillow or sprayed your favorite cashmere sweater, you might think he was getting revenge because you went out to dinner after work instead of coming home and feeding him on time. It's an understandable belief, but it's not accurate.

Cats are complex in many ways, but they live in the here and now. Plotting revenge just isn't up their alley. When your cat sprays your clothing or bedding, he's actually paying you a compliment, backhanded though it may be. Those items smell like you, and adding his scent to yours makes the cat feel comfortable, especially if he's feeling stressed for some reason. It might be because you went out to dinner and interrupted his feeding schedule, but it also might be a response to the presence of a stray cat in your yard, bullying by another cat in the household, or even some incident that you didn't notice but that made an impression on your cat.

What we have with cats who spray is not a failure to communicate but more of an undesirable attempt to communicate. While your cat may have a valid message to send to you or to one of his housemates or the stray cat who's been lurking outside his front door, his stinky method of getting it across is making you, well, cross. If your cat is urine marking, you need to reduce his need to communicate. That can mean surgically altering him or her, changing the environment, instituting a behavior modification plan, or administering pheromones or medications that will help to decrease the anxiety that is often behind the territorial imperative to mark. Depending on the situation and the individual cat, a behaviorist may recommend one or a combination of these options.

Environmental changes start with establishing an atmosphere of plenty. Give your cat multiple perches, toys, scratching posts, and places to eat and drink. If he doesn't feel as if he has to hoard his resources, he'll be more relaxed.

An environmental factor that may inspire a cat to continue to spray is the type of furniture you have. Items made of particleboard absorb odor much more intensely than furniture made of solid wood. (That's right; your cat is an interior design critic.) For a cat, spraying an object that will hold odor longer and better is a major plus. It's like buying air time for an advertisement during the Super Bowl.

Behavior modification techniques vary depending on the situation and the individual cat, but some methods are universal, especially when it comes to problems caused by anxiety. Work directly with a behaviorist if possible, but if there isn't one in your area, the following advice may help.

Keep a record of when and where your cat sprays. Include details such as time of day, whether it seems to be in response to a particular stimulus, and even seemingly unremarkable changes in the household, such as getting your hair colored or your spouse shaving his mustache.

Give your cat a predictable daily routine. He should know that meals or playtime will always occur at the same time every day, as much as possible.

Ignore behavior you don't like and reward behavior you do like.

Chemically enhance your cat's environment with pheromones. Pheromones are biological or chemical substances that influence sexual and other behaviors in animals. They are often used in conjunction with behavior modification or counterconditioning programs, so it's not always easy to tell whether it's the pheromone or the behavior modification plan that's really making the difference. Nonetheless, they are harmless and have a good track record of reducing spraying behavior. Feliway is a widely used pheromone that is dispensed via a spray bottle (like cologne) or a plug-in diffuser. The diffuser covers 500 to 700 square feet and lasts for 30 days. If the spraying behavior occurs throughout the house, you will probably need to use more than one diffuser. It's common to see results in three to ten days, and sometimes sooner.

If all else fails, bring out the big guns: medication (for the cat, not for you). Drugs such as fluoxetine (Prozac) and clomipramine are often effective in dealing with territorial marking, but they won't help with garden-variety house-soiling. Fluoxetine formulated for people is available inexpensively in generic form, but the beef-flavored version made for pets is often more popular with cats and the people who have to pill them.

The down side is that drugs are not a quick fix and they work best in concert with a behavior modification program. You can't just give a pill and expect an instant result.

Traveling clean with pets



If your pet travels with you, whether on vacation or because you're moving to a new home, you're likely to spend some time together in hotels or as guests in other people's homes. Here are some tips to ensure that your pet is a welcome visitor wherever he goes.

Besides the essentials—food, dishes and toys—pack your pet’s bag with the following items:

Plastic bags for picking up waste.

A good supply of paper towels. They’ll be indispensable if you’re traveling with a young puppy or if your dog begins vomiting and has diarrhea because of a change in water or food.

Your favorite enzymatic stain and odor remover.

Several large flat sheets to throw over the bed or sofa so your dog doesn’t adorn them with dog hair or drool.

A crate to ensure that your dog doesn’t nibble on the wallpaper or furniture if you’ve stepped out to go to the ice machine. Soft-sided or wire crates that fold up are good choices if you’re tight on space.

With these useful accessories in your dog or cat’s kit bag, you’ll both be invited back wherever you go.

Dr. Marty Becker, “America’s Veterinarian,” has spent his life working toward better health for pets and the people who love them. For 16 years, he has been the popular veterinary contributor on ABC’s “Good Morning America.” He is a founding member of “Core Team Oz” for “The Dr. Oz Show” and a member of the Dr. Oz Medical Advisory Panel. He is the lead veterinary expert for Vetstreet.com, the popular pet-care site.
