



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



"To pee, or not to pee....", that is the question when it comes to litter trays!
Vicky Halls investigates...

House soiling, particularly urination in inappropriate places, is a very common behavioural problem. There are a number of possible causes, without exception, the provision of attractive indoor litter facilities is an integral part of the solution. Here are some of the most common questions on this subject with my corresponding answers.

Do I need to provide a litter tray if my cat goes outdoors?

There are more cats than ever living in the UK. This means that the cat population density around our homes is greater than ever. If your cat doesn't feel safe toileting outside (due to the threat of strange cats) then 'accidents' may occur indoors. Providing a litter tray for such emergencies makes sense, even if it remains largely unused.

What type of tray should I provide?

The majority of litter trays are plastic and rectangular but 'designer' ones are available, from simple cardboard disposable trays to elaborate automatic self-cleaning devices.

So which would your cat prefer? There is very little research available to give a definitive answer and all cats are different, but I would recommend the biggest tray that can be accommodated in the allocated area, bearing in mind you may start with a small tray for a tiny kitten and then rapidly progress to one more appropriate to the adult frame.

Should trays be covered or open?

Covered trays are seen by many as preferable for cats to provide a discreet and private toilet, but can give any 'bully' cat in your home a chance to trap its victim or wait in ambush by sitting on the top. Many cats adapt to a closed facility but there are some who feel vulnerable confined in a small space with only one exit point.

How big should a litter tray be?

Due to the increased popularity of giant breeds and multi-cat households I favour the 'Jumbo' tray size (22" [49cm] x 17" [38cm]) as a minimum, larger modified storage containers (in clear plastic) or garden trays (that provide the expansive dimensions without the corresponding depth). Based on general experience, a formula for ideal litter tray size is 'one and a half times the length of the cat from its nose to the base of its tail'. This gives the cat opportunity to move around, dig and cover without any sense of restriction.

What litter should I use?

Litter substrates include paper, wood, silica, corn, wheat and fuller's earth, but the sand-like non-scented litters best mimic the material that cats instinctively favour. If however you are fortunate enough to have a cat that uses lightweight, biodegradable products (for example) then these are much easier to dispose of and, providing you clean them out thoroughly, just as good as any of the more expensive ones for keeping odours to a minimum. Many owners maintain the litter that their cat has used since it was a kitten and this usually works.

How deep should the litter be?

There are varying views; I have found that if the litter is too deep it forms an undulating surface which some find off-putting. A depth of 3-4cm is what I recommend, unless your own cat has shown a distinct preference for an alternative amount. However, if your cat is suffering from any medical condition that results in increased urine production, then the depth should be sufficient to soak up the larger than normal amount of liquid that is deposited at any one time.

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the International Cat Care's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For more information about these books or if you have any concerns about your own cat's behaviour please visit her website: www.vickyhalls.net



To scoop or not to scoop?

Litters are further categorised into clumping and non-clumping. The clumping litters, when urine is passed onto them, form a hard mass that can be removed by a scoop designed for the purpose. If this is done, together with removing stools on a daily basis, it leaves a clean environment. The non-clumping litters are advertised as 'easy maintenance' as the urine is absorbed into the material and only removed when the whole litter is changed. Whichever you choose, if you can detect an odour from the tray you may need to revise the type of litter you use or your cleaning regime.

How often should I clean the tray/s and what should I use?

For clumping sand-like substrates I would recommend scooping at least twice daily and replacing completely once a week, washing the litter tray with hot water and mild detergent. Avoid the use of phenol disinfectants as these are toxic to cats and if your vet recommends using a stronger antibacterial or virucidal tray cleaning product then be guided by that advice.

What about accessories?

Polythene tray liners are designed to be used as a container for removal of soiled contents although, in reality, they often leak badly as there are bound to be puncture marks and tears. Also, getting claws caught in polythene while attempting to cover deposits may be unpleasant for cats and I therefore don't recommend them.

Litter deodorants are available but the overpowering scent has no positive benefit for cats and may have a negative effect as they reject the tray in favour of something that smells more like a toilet.

How many trays should I provide?

When cats go to the toilet outdoors they generally prefer separate locations for urination and defecation. So if you were to simulate the ideal facilities indoors you would provide two trays for one cat. In multi-cat groups there is always need to provide sufficient resources, such as feeding areas and beds, to avoid conflict and competition and this advice is most relevant to litter trays. The formula 'one tray per cat plus one extra in different locations' is not based on hard evidence

but many agree it is sound advice. This means that, if you have four cats, the ideal number of trays is five. This often causes dismay in owners who have several cats, so the compromise here is to identify how well a multi-cat group works. If the cats are seen as one cohesive group, or several sub-groups are easily identified, the formula can be adapted to 'one per social group plus one extra'.

Where should I place the tray/s?

The formula stipulates that trays are not located in the same area – if they are located in different areas it makes strategic guarding by assertive individuals almost impossible.

Where those trays are positioned is crucial if they are to be seen as **safe** places to toilet. They should be in discreet corners or adjacent to walls so that the cat has full view of approaching danger but is protected from behind. Toilet sites should be away from food and water (for obvious reasons) and away from busy thoroughfares where toileting may be interrupted. Other areas to avoid include those adjacent to full-length windows, cat flaps and external doors where the threat from unknown forces may be particularly evident.

Are there any special considerations for elderly cats?

As your cat gets older, irrespective of its habits up to now, an indoor tray will probably be a requirement. If your cat is arthritic then a large tray with a low entrance would avoid any discomfort. ●

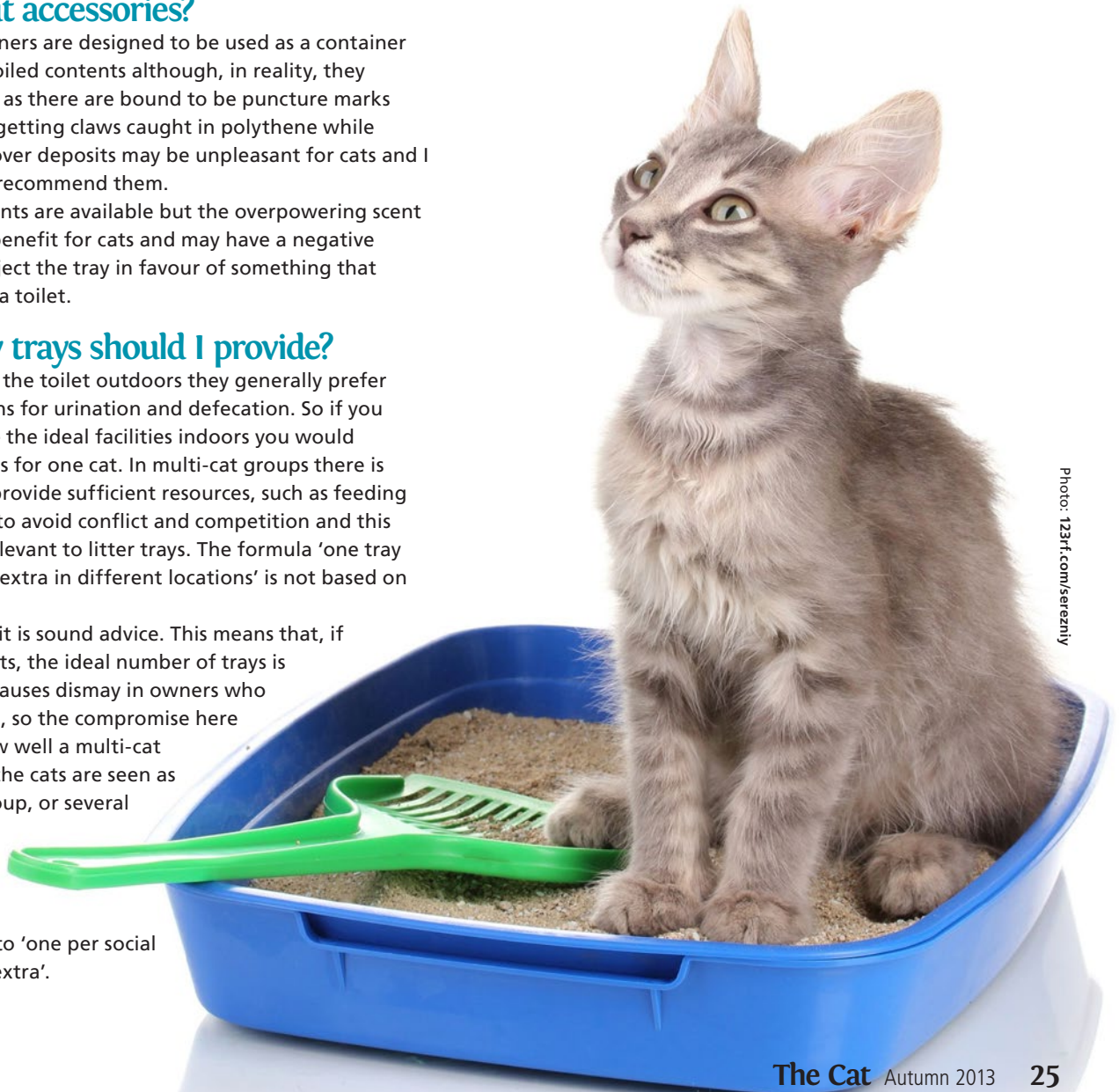


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