

What's That Awful Smell? Skip These Common Mistakes and Banish It for Good

Owning pets can sometime mean messes, and some unsavory smells and stains can take up permanent residence in your home if you let them. Use this special tool to reveal where the stains are hiding so you can tackle it before your pet has the chance to revisit — and reuse — the scene of the crime.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your cat is urinating outside the litterbox, it's important to find out why, for the sake of your cat, as well as your home
- There are many reasons cats pee outside the litterbox, including a dirty box, litter they don't approve of, the placement of the box, health issues and more
- If you're not sure where your cat has relieved himself, use a black light to reveal urine stains around your home
- Removing urine stains and odors on absorbent material-like carpeting requires the right tools and a multi-step process that may need to be repeated to completely resolve the problem

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 29, 2017.

On occasion (and in some cases, more than occasionally), cat urine winds up somewhere other than the litterbox — usually on a soft absorbent surface like carpeting, an area rug, a pile of clothes or even your bed.

Obviously, this is a problem that must be tackled from a few different angles, the most important of which is to sort out why little Fluffy isn't confining her potty habits to her litterbox. There are a number of reasons she might relieve herself outside the box. Here are a few of the most common:

- **The box isn't scooped and/or disinfected often enough** — Cats are fastidious creatures who don't enjoy a dirty, stinky bathroom any more than we do. That's why you must be extremely disciplined about scooping the box. As in, once or twice a day scooping of all poop and urine clumps.

Also remove any litter stuck to the sides or bottom of the box with a damp paper towel. Dry the area thoroughly before scooping dry litter back over it. Keeping the sides and floor of the box clean and dry may help extend the time between full box clean-outs. Dispose of all used litter and clean the box at least weekly.

It's important to wash the litterbox thoroughly to remove as much odor as possible so your cat doesn't get turned off by the smell and decide not to use it. Wash the box using hot water and fragrance-free soap. Avoid scented cleaners and products containing potential toxins.

- **Your cat doesn't like your choice of litter** or the box is in a high-traffic area or is difficult to get into or out of.
- **She has a medical condition like FLUTD** (feline lower urinary tract disease), or another chronic illness.
- **Your kitty is a senior citizen or is experiencing cognitive decline.**

If your cat suddenly starts peeing outside her well-maintained litterbox and you haven't moved the box or changed the type of litter she prefers, make an appointment with your veterinarian to check for an underlying physical or cognitive issue that may be contributing to the problem.

How to Pinpoint Where Your Cat's Been Peeing

The next thing you'll want to do is to get rid of urine odors for your own sanity, and so your kitty won't continually return to the scene of the crime and reoffend.

Often when a **cat urinates outside the litterbox**, no one notices right away because it's a small spot that dries quickly or it's somewhat hidden. As the bacteria in the urine decomposes, it gives off that telltale ammonia-like odor we all know and don't love. Older kitties whose kidneys aren't working at 100% efficiency can have more potent-smelling urine than younger cats, as well as intact males whose urine contains testosterone.

If you discover your cat has been peeing in a spot outside his litterbox, it's a good idea to find out if he's doing it in other areas of the house as well. The quickest way to do this is with a black light. Urine stains appear in a lovely shade of neon green when illuminated with a black light, so darken your house and walk around shining the light on floors, baseboards and anywhere there are suspicious stains or smells.

Removing Urine Stains and Smells

For dried urine spots, treatment will depend on the type of surface you're dealing with. Hard materials such as tile, wood flooring and baseboards can be cleaned using a safe, natural solution like 1 part hydrogen peroxide and 2 parts water, or undiluted white vinegar. Liberally spray the solution on the urine stain, wipe and repeat as often as necessary to eliminate any lingering odor. If the smell remains despite your best efforts, purchase an enzyme-based cleaner as described below and re-treating the area(s).

Cleaning carpeting, upholstery or another absorbent surface requires a bit more effort. Cat urine is composed of several different chemicals, strains of bacteria and other substances. And while natural cleaners like hydrogen peroxide, vinegar or baking soda can deal with some urine odors, they don't deal with them all.

That's why it's important to have an enzyme cleaner on hand to deal with the uric acid in cat urine stains. Take these steps to thoroughly clean urine stains and odors from carpets, rugs and other absorbent surfaces:

1. If the spot is still wet, **use paper towels or another absorbent material like a rag or cloth** and blot up as much of the urine as possible before moving to step 2.
2. **Pour plain water over the spot and soak up the moisture**, again using clean, white cloths or paper towels — continue blotting until no yellow appears on the towels.
3. **Saturate the spot with a commercially available enzyme-based "digester" solution and let it sit for the prescribed amount of time** — Thoroughly saturate the soiled areas, including carpet padding, if you

suspect the urine has soaked all the way through.

4. **Use more clean paper towels to blot up as much moisture as you can and then allow the spot to air-dry** — Protecting the just-treated area is a good idea to prevent humans from walking through it and kitty from finding it and re-soiling. You can place aluminum foil loosely over the spots or use upside-down laundry baskets, bowls, baking sheets or similar items.

If the urine spot has been there awhile, you may need to repeat the last two steps at least once. Depending on the scope of the problem, be prepared to make this a multi-week project as you soak the spots, blot them, allow them to dry and then repeat the process as many times as necessary to completely remove stains and odor.

Additional Suggestions

Do yourself a favor and DO NOT make the mistake of using any old carpet-cleaning product you have on hand instead of a specialized pet formula. The products sold specifically for pet messes contain bacteria and enzyme digesters that are extremely effectively at eliminating stains and odor in both carpet and padding, without damaging or discoloring most flooring materials.

If you try something else on the spot first, then use a specialized pet formula, you may not get the same good result you can achieve using the pet product only. Also, no matter how bad the stain may look or smell when you discover it, resist the urge to use a harsh scrubbing motion to remove the spot, as this can quickly destroy the texture of your carpet or rug, and scrubbing really isn't necessary.

If you're patient and follow the steps listed above for stain removal, even if you have to repeat the process a few times to get all the stain out, there's a very good chance you won't notice the spot after it dries thoroughly. Even light-colored carpeting and rugs can be returned to good condition with the right cleaning agent and technique.

Once the urine is completely removed from a spot your cat has repeatedly soiled, try applying a few drops of a pure essential oil (like lemon, tangerine and lavender) on the area as a deterrent.

Unfortunately, urine occasionally soaks all the way through carpet and padding into the subfloor. If you can't get rid the smell despite all your best cleaning efforts, you'll need to remove that area of carpet and padding, neutralize the odor with an oil-based, stain-blocking primer on the subfloor and then replace the padding and carpet.

Sources and References

[PetMD, March 20, 2024](#)
