

Canine Urine Marking

Some dogs scent mark by urinating small amounts on vertical surfaces, usually while raising a leg. Both female and male dogs can urine mark. Marking can occur in a number of situations, including while on walks, when in their own homes and yards, and during visits to other locations.

Why Do Dogs Urine Mark?

Reproductively Intact Dog

Dogs who are reproductively intact (unspayed females and unneutered males) are more likely to urine mark than spayed or neutered dogs. In unspayed females, urine marking usually happens more frequently just before and during estrus (in heat).

Environmental Triggers

Some dogs urine mark when they encounter nonresident dogs in their environment or smell urine left by other dogs. A dog's environment may encompass his home, his yard, the route he usually takes when on walks, friends' homes he regularly visits, and parks or other locations he frequents.

Social Triggers

Exciting social situations can trigger urine marking. Some male dogs urine mark only in the presence of female dogs (especially if the females are in heat) while some urine mark only when interacting with other male dogs. Dogs may urine mark when visiting homes where other dogs have urine marked before or when they become overstimulated in social situations. These dogs often mark nearby objects, people or other dogs.

Anxiety

Some dogs urine mark when they experience anxiety. Anxious dogs might deposit greater amounts of urine than dogs marking for other reasons. They might also urine mark on spots that aren't vertical surfaces. A number of events can cause anxiety and trigger urine marking, including the presence of new objects, furniture or luggage in a dog's environment, the departure of a resident from a dog's home, a new person moving into the home, and conflict between a dog and people or other animals in the home.

Medical Causes to Rule Out

Spay/Urinary Incontinence

Some dogs' house soiling is caused by incontinence, a medical condition in which a dog "leaks" or completely voids the bladder. Dogs with incontinence problems usually seem unaware that they've soiled. Sometimes they void urine while asleep.

Urinary Tract Infection

A urinary tract infection (UTI) can cause a dog to void small amounts of urine frequently. In addition, a dog who has a UTI might engage in excessive licking of her or his genitalia.

Miscellaneous Medical Causes

Other medical reasons for house soiling are abnormalities of the genitalia that cause incontinence, diseases that cause frequent urination, and medications that cause frequent urination. These and all other medical causes should be ruled out before evaluating or treating a dog for urine marking.

Other Types of Urination Problems to Rule Out

Submissive/Excitement Urination

Your dog might have a submissive or excitement urination problem if he only urinates during greetings, play, physical contact, scolding or punishment. If this is the case, you might notice him displaying submissive postures during interactions. He might cringe or cower, roll over on his belly, duck his head, avert his eyes, flatten his ears or all of the above.

Lack of House Training

If a dog has always soiled in the home, has lived outside or in a kennel, or has an unknown history, it's likely that she has never been house trained. Ask us for more information on house training.

Separation Anxiety

If your dog only soils when left alone in your home, even for short periods of time, she may have separation anxiety. If this is the case, you may notice that she appears nervous or upset right before you leave her by herself or after you've left.

What to Do About Urine Marking

Urine marking is a normal form of communication among dogs. Dogs are drawn to urine marks left by other dogs and are apparently able to get information by sniffing the urine, such as the identity, sex and reproductive status (whether a dog is neutered or spayed) of the marker. Males are more likely than females to urine mark, and reproductively intact males are more likely to mark than neutered males, especially in the presence of females or rival males. Reproductively intact females will mark, especially prior to and during estrus (in heat) to advertise their availability. However, even spayed females sometimes urine mark. A study of urine marking in dogs revealed that 10 percent of the dogs who urine marked started the behavior at 3 months of age, 20 percent by 6 months, 40 percent by 12 months, 70 percent by 1½ years, and 90 percent before 2 years.

Both male and female dogs usually lift a rear leg to urine mark. Females can also do a handstand to raise both rear legs! A dog urine marking behavior typically deposits only a small amount of urine. Dogs of either sex often engage in "overmarking" — urinating in the same spots where other dogs have already urinated. In many *canid* species, more dominant individuals overmark the urine deposits of more subordinate individuals. Many dogs will only overmark the urine of other animals or people. Some dogs will mark a few specific areas or things, such as prominent vertical objects, new objects, or areas around exit doors or windows. Other dogs seem to mark indiscriminately.

Many dogs will urine mark during walks but never mark inside their homes. Dogs can mark in the home as a territorial response, especially if the marking occurs when a dog encounters a nonresident dog or smells another dog's urine on his property or house. For example, a dog might mark on his pet parent's shoes, presumably because the person walked through and picked up the odor of urine from another dog.

Other causes for urine marking are social triggers, such as encountering a female dog in estrus. In this situation, a male dog might mark to impress the female, while a female dog might mark as a form of competition. Male dogs might also urine mark when around rival males. Some dogs never mark in their own homes but *will* mark when they visit other homes. A dog is especially likely to urine mark when visiting a home if another dog has previously marked in that home. Dogs who become overstimulated around dogs, especially in large groups, sometimes "zone out" and urine mark any object in the area, including other dogs and people's legs. Occasionally, dogs who mark during walks become so aroused they continue marking when they return to their homes.

Treatment for Reproductively Intact Dogs

The easiest solution for urine marking in a reproductively intact dog is to neuter a male dog or spay a female dog. Neutering male dogs successfully eliminates or greatly reduces household urine marking in 50 to 60 percent of cases.

If you plan to breed your dog or you're resistant to spaying or neutering, you can follow many of the suggestions that follow for dogs who appear to urine mark around specific social or environmental triggers. Be aware, however, that the likelihood of successfully eliminating or reducing urine marking is lower if your dog is still intact.

Treatment for Environmental or Social Triggers

The following tips can help reduce urine marking if your dog tends to mark when encountering new things in his environment or experiencing certain social situations:

- Restrict your dog's access to things he's likely to mark. Don't allow other dogs to visit your home or yard. You can also try blocking your dog's visual access to other dogs.
- If you have a male dog, have him wear a jock strap or bellyband. You can purchase a bellyband made for dogs from a pet supply company. This option is especially appropriate if your dog only urine marks when visiting others' homes.
- If your dog predictably marks certain objects (bags, suitcases or shoes, for example), or if he only marks in certain locations, place treats around those objects or in those areas. Your dog might start to regard objects he used to mark and places where he used to mark as sources of food rather than triggers for marking.
- Clean previously marked locations with an enzymatic cleaner, such as Nature's Miracle, to minimize smells that can attract your dog back to mark. You can find cleaners made for eliminating pet odors at most pet supply stores and some grocery stores.
- Try to make marked areas unpleasant to discourage your dog from returning. Double-sided sticky tape, vinyl carpet runner turned upside-down to expose the knobby surface, or other types of humane, harmless booby traps are good options. Keep in mind, however, that your dog might simply choose another place to urine mark.
- Provide your dog with an acceptable target for marking, such as a tree trunk or artificial fire hydrant. Expose him to something that prompts his marking, such as the urine of another dog, and then immediately take him to your chosen target. Wait until he marks, and then reward him with praise and a few tasty treats for marking in the correct place.
- Scolding or physically punishing your dog probably won't work, but it's possible that a remotely delivered punishment will interrupt or discourage marking. When you see your dog start to mark, you can try clapping loudly, spraying him with water, or tossing a noisy chain on the floor next to him. It's critical to deliver these punishments *while your dog is caught in the act of urine marking* so that he understands why you're punishing him. Your dog might be strongly motivated to urine mark — so much so that he might not even be aware of what he's doing. If this is the case, punishing or startling him won't work. Another reason punishment for urine marking might not work is that your dog can learn that your presence is linked with punishment. So he'll continue to mark, but only when out of your sight.
- Try using a synthetic hormone diffuser (Dog Appeasement Pheromone, or DAP). In some cases, it has a calming effect on dogs.
- As a last resort, ask your veterinarian about using medication in addition to behavior training. Scientific studies show that some medications can help reduce urine marking.

Treatment for Anxious Urine Marking

A few dogs urine mark when distressed or anxious. Typically, this kind of marking is prompted by some perceived threat, such as an unfamiliar person or dog in the home, or the introduction of something new, such as a pet, a baby, new furniture, suitcases, grocery bags, etc. Other stressors that trigger urine marking include the absence of a family member (person or pet), or conflict within the home. If a dog's urine marking is caused by conflict, he might mark unusual objects, such as beds and clothing, items that smell strongly of a person or another pet. To reduce your dog's anxious marking, try the following:

- Restrict your dog's access to things he's likely to mark.
- Try to resolve conflicts between family pets. If one of your pets is new, ask us for information on re-introducing them more gradually and positively. If your pets have lived together for some time and are now not getting along, ask us for help.
- If a new resident has joined your household, try to resolve conflicts between your dog and the new person. Make the new person a source of good things, such as food, treats, chews, walks, play and fun outings. If conflict continues, ask us for further help.
- If you have a male dog, have him wear a jock strap or bellyband so he can mark but not soil in your home. You can purchase a bellyband made for dogs from a pet supply company.
- If your dog predictably marks certain objects (bags, suitcases or shoes, for example), or if he only marks in certain locations, place treats around those objects or in those areas. Your dog might start to regard those objects and places he used to mark as sources of food rather than triggers for marking.
- Clean previously marked locations with an enzymatic cleaner, such as Nature's Miracle Stain and Odor Remover, to minimize smells that can attract your dog back to mark again.
- Try to make marked areas unpleasant to discourage your dog from returning. Double-sided sticky tape, vinyl carpet runner turned upside-down to expose the knobby surface, or other types of humane, harmless booby traps are good options.
- Try using a synthetic hormone diffuser (Dog Appeasement Pheromone, or DAP). In some cases, it can have a calming effect on dogs.
- Ask your veterinarian about using medications to supplement behavior modification. Some medications work well to diminish anxiety in dogs, and if your dog feels less anxious, he'll be less likely to urine mark.

What NOT to Do

- Do not scold your dog. Yelling at dogs when they urine mark rarely works, even when they're caught in the act.
- Do not prevent your dog from urine marking during walks. If anything, this can frustrate your dog and increase the likelihood of marking at home.
- Do not clean with an ammonia-based cleanser. Urine contains ammonia. Cleaning up your dog's urine with ammonia can attract him back to the scent.