

CAT URINE MARKING

The most common behavior problem reported by pet parents of cats is inappropriate elimination. It's estimated that 10 percent of all cats will eliminate outside their litter box at some point in their lives. Quite a few of these cats have issues with some characteristic of their litter box, but many of them — approximately 30 percent — don't have litter box problems at all. These cats are urine marking, and urine marking isn't a litter box problem: it's a communication problem. Urine marking is a form of indirect communication used by cats.

Why Do Cats Urine Mark?

Animal species that live in social groups where members depend on each other for survival have sophisticated interpersonal communication. Animals who can cause significant harm to each other, such as dogs, have developed social mechanisms for preventing conflict through hierarchies. They are prepared to assume either a leadership or deference position, and they can read another animal's body language to interpret their intentions and react accordingly. But cats have a somewhat unique social structure in that they do not hunt, eat or sleep in groups like dogs.

Given the opportunity, cats strike out on their own when they mature and claim certain areas or territories for themselves. They may share territory with other cats, but it's a time-share approach — they avoid each other whenever possible. They haven't developed a social system or communication like dogs. Socially, cats who greet often handle things like two neighbors in an argument — although one might back down if they think they might get injured, neither individual will ever perceive themselves as having lower status than the other. Cats have no system for working out face-to-face disputes, so they can be dangerous for them. To avoid disputes, cats communicate indirectly — they leave messages.

Cats have numerous ways to leave messages for each other, and one way is through urine marking. By urine marking, a cat tells other cats of their presence and makes a statement about such things as what piece of property is theirs, how long ago they were in the area and, over time, when other cats can expect them to return. Cats can even advertise when they are looking for a mate: the urine tells other cats all this information. This way, cats rarely have to meet up with each other.

Cats who live in houses might not have to hunt for their food or find a mate, but they still look at their world in the same way as cats who must survive on their own. They use the social and communication skills that nature gave them. If their world is predictable — there are no conflicts, they are spayed or neutered, they don't need to mate — cats have little reason to mark, and probably will not. But if they want a mate or they are distressed about something, they'll deal with their distress like a cat and mark their territory. To a cat, marking helps keep unwanted individuals away — whoever and whatever those individuals may be — and it creates an atmosphere of familiarity that makes them feel more secure.

Is It a Litter Box Problem or a Communication Problem?

It takes a bit of detective work to determine whether your cat has a litter box problem or is urine marking. Cats who urine mark also use their litter boxes for voiding, so urine in the litter box does not rule out marking outside the box. But urine marking deposits are usually qualitatively different than inappropriate eliminations outside the box. The following characteristics indicate urine marking:

- **Urine marks are usually deposited on vertical surfaces.** Marking on a vertical surface is known as spraying. When spraying, a cat usually backs up to a vertical object like the side of a chair, a wall or a stereo speaker, stands with their body erect and their tail extended straight up in the air, and sprays urine onto the surface. Often their tail (and sometimes their entire body) twitch while they're spraying.
- **Urine mark deposits often have less volume than voided deposits.** The amount of urine a cat sprays when they're making a urine mark is usually less than the amount they would void during regular elimination.
- **The urine smells pungent.** Cats can learn so much from the urine mark of another cat because a urine mark isn't just urine — it also contains extra communication chemicals. Those chemicals smell pungent to people.

There are certain characteristics of a cat or household that can contribute to urine marking:

- **The cat is an unneutered male.** Although intact female cats as well as neutered and spayed cats can urine mark, unneutered males are more likely to urine mark because one function of marking is to advertise reproductive availability.
- **There are multiple cats in the household.** The more cats that live in a home, the more likely it is that at least one of them will urine mark. Houses that have more than 10 cats invariably have urine marking problems.
- **There has been a change in the household.** Cats don't like change. Urine marking can be triggered by someone moving in or out, getting a dog or cat or other animal, building or remodeling a room, changing work hours, going to the hospital, having a baby, buying a new coat or even bringing home groceries in a large paper bag. One of the ways cats can respond to change is by marking their territory. They might do it to preempt a problem by leaving a message that this place is theirs, or they might do it to comfort themselves with their own familiar scent.
- **There is conflict between cats.** Conflict can be with cats in the house or with cats your cat sees outside. Cats mark in response to conflict with other cats for the same reasons they mark in response to household changes. Cat conflict is a common reason for urine marking, and it is usually anxiety based rather than intolerance based. A cat doesn't necessarily get angry because another cat has the audacity to come into their territory; rather, they get upset because they don't have the social skills to deal with the intrusion. If a cat is prevented from avoiding the other cat, they'll become increasingly stressed and mark often.

Treating Urine Marking in Intact Cats

Here are a few things you can do to remedy the urine marking behavior of an intact cat:

- **Neuter or spay your cat.** Although marking isn't limited to advertisement for a mate, advertisement is one reason that cats mark. Neutering or spaying is a proven treatment for cats who mark as a reproductive advertisement.
- **Close windows, blinds and doors.** Prevent your indoor cat from seeing other neighborhood cats.

Treating Urine Marking Caused by Conflict in a Multi-Cat Household

The first step in fixing any elimination problem is to rule out medical problems. Although there is no medical problem that contributes specifically to urine marking, physical problems can create increased anxiety in a cat, which can contribute to marking. Once your veterinarian has determined that your cat doesn't have a medical condition or issue, follow these guidelines:

- **Determine which cat is marking.** If you have multiple cats and aren't sure which cat is marking, speak with your veterinarian about giving fluorescein, a harmless dye, to one of your cats. Although the dye does not usually stain furniture or walls, it causes urine to glow blue under ultraviolet light for about 24 hours. If you can't get or use fluorescein, you can temporarily confine your cats, one at a time, to determine which one is marking.
- **Provide enough litter boxes.** Although marking is not an elimination problem, if there are too few litter boxes for all the cats, conflict will arise over litter box use, which can contribute to marking. Make sure you have one box for each cat in your house, plus one extra. For example, if you have three cats, you want a minimum of four litter boxes. Place added boxes in locations where the anxious (marking) cat spends most of their time.
- **Place litter boxes in low-traffic areas with at least two exit routes.** You want to avoid conflict between your cats. Additionally, if you have a dog, keep the boxes away from your dog's food and water bowls. Cats can mark in response to dogs as well as other cats.
- **Scoop at least once a day.** In addition to scooping daily, clean all litter boxes with warm water and unscented soap (or baking soda and no soap). Completely replace the litter once a week. This helps reduce the presence of any offending "other cat" scent.
- **Provide multiple perching areas.** Cats need their own space. Conflict can often be reduced simply by providing more perching areas so that all cats can have a place to rest well away from the others. Creating space can be as easy as clearing windowsills and shelves or purchasing multi-perch cat trees.

- **Distribute resources.** Provide multiple sources of food, water, scratching posts, perches and toys so that each cat can make use of them without coming into contact or having a conflict with one of the other cats.
- **Play with your cats.** Increased play with individual cats in different areas of your home can sometimes reduce conflict. Encourage play with toys that dangle on strings suspended from sticks, such as the CatDancer or Kitty Tease. Attempts to encourage mutual play can sometimes help reduce conflict, but it might simply increase conflict if your cats react poorly at the very sight of each other.
- **Improve relationships.** Work on improving the relationships among the cats by making all their associations with each other positive using treats, affection and play. When you're not around to do that, keep them separated.
- **Give them alone time.** You should also provide the marking cat with "alone time" four to six hours a day, away from your other cats.
- **Clean accidents.** Clean thoroughly with an enzymatic cleanser designed to neutralize pet odors. You can find this kind of cleaner at most pet stores.
- **Use Feliway.** Feliway has been shown to have some effect in relieving stress in cats. Deliver the Feliway through a diffuser plugged in close to where your cat has seen the outdoor cats. Feliway is available as a spray or through a diffuser, and it can be found in many pet stores and online.
- **Use medications.** Because marking is often a sign of stress or anxiety, medication can provide additional treatment help. Ask us for more information on behavioral medications available for your pet. If you're considering behavioral medication, be certain to first consult with your veterinarian, a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB) or a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behavior (Dip ACVB).

Treating Urine Marking Caused by Conflict with Outdoor Cats

You can try the following recommendations to remedy urine marking behavior caused by conflict with an outdoor cat:

- **Clean well.** Make sure you clean all affected areas well with an enzymatic cleaner designed for pet odors. As long as there is an olfactory cue — in this case, the smell of the urine — the cat will continue to spray.
- **Restrict access.** Don't let your cat near sprayed areas until they've been cleaned.
- **Close windows, blinds and doors.** If the spraying is a response to cats outside, prevent your indoor cat from seeing neighborhood cats by covering the windows or put something slightly aversive on the windowsill like a lemon-scented solid deodorizer.
- **Attach a motion-detection device to your lawn sprinkler.** Set the sprinkler by windows to deter the presence of neighborhood cats.

- **Neuter or spay.** If your cat is intact, neuter or spay them.
- **Try Feliway.** Feliway, a synthetic cat pheromone, has been shown to have some effect in relieving stress in cats. Deliver the Feliway with a diffuser plugged in close to where your cat has seen the outdoor cats. Feliway is available as a spray or through a diffuser, and it can be found in many pet stores and online.
- **Discourage the cat from marking.** Make the area less attractive to the cat with aluminum foil, sticky paper, sandpaper, or a carpet runner with the nubby side up. You can also use aversive smells in the area such as menthol, perfumes, air fresheners, potpourri, oil of wintergreen or citrus.
- **Change the significance of the area.** Feeding the cat in the spot that they are marking, or provide catnip, toys and treats.
- **Use punishment — discreetly.** As soon as you see your cat getting ready to spray — or at least within the first few seconds of the onset of the behavior — startle them with a penny can, water gun, whistle, etc. *Do not let them see you!* The noise or water must seem to come out of nowhere. If your cat associates the punishment with you, they will just learn to spray when you are not around. If the punishment appears out of nowhere, they may associate it with spraying and consequently cease the behavior.
- **Use medications.** Because marking is often a sign of stress or anxiety, medication might provide additional treatment help. Ask us for more information on the different medicine choices available for your pet. Always consult with your veterinarian, a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB) or a veterinary behaviorist (Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behavior, Dip ACVB) before giving your cat any type of medication for a behavior problem.

What NOT to Do

Here are a few things to avoid when treating urine marking:

- **DO NOT** rub your cat's nose in their urine.
- **DO NOT** throw things at your cat.
- **DO NOT** clean up accidents with an ammonia-based cleanser. Urine contains ammonia, so cleaning with ammonia can attract your cat to the same spot to urinate again.