

ACE Shelter Solutions™

Feline House Soiling (Marking and Spraying Behavior)

Spraying Defined

Spraying, or marking, is urinating on vertical surfaces. Most cats back up to the spot to urinate. The tail may quiver, and they don't crouch. A small number of cats mark by leaving small amounts of urine, or occasionally stool, on horizontal surfaces.

Why do cats mark?

This is normal feline behavior. Unfortunately, because we want cats to share our homes, we don't want them to do this.

By depositing an odor, the cat communicates to other animals that it was there. They mark to signal ownership or advertise sexual receptivity and availability. Cats also mark their territory when they feel threatened or stressed. This can occur with a change in household routine, new cats or dogs, new living locations, and other environmental and social changes. In these cases, the cat may mark new objects brought into the household or the possessions of family members, especially if they belong to the source of the greatest source of conflict or insecurity.

Because marking is a method of delineating territory, urine is often found in prominent locations, or at entry and exit points to the outdoors such as doors and windows and around the periphery.

Who is most likely to mark?

Both male and female cats can mark with urine. It's seen most often in intact (non-neutered) male cats. When an intact male sprays urine, it has a characteristic "tom cat" odor - strong and repulsive. Sterilization changes the odor, and it reduces the cat's motivation for spraying. Sterilization eliminates spraying in 90% of males and 95% of females. While cats in multiple cat households are often involved in spraying behaviors, cats that are housed singly may spray as well.

Not all urination is based on marking. A small amount of urine deposited outside of the litter box is most often due to either a disease of the urinary system or litter box avoidance, which could have many causes. Similarly, stool found outside of the litter box can be due to a multitude of medical causes including colitis, constipation, and arthritis. As with any other elimination problem, a complete physical examination and laboratory tests are necessary to rule out each physical cause.

How do you approach a spraying or marking problem?

Success comes by decreasing the motivation for spraying, and this may be as simple as making the box more accessible or improving litter box hygiene. The minimum number of litter boxes should equal to the number of cats plus one. The litter should be cleaned daily and changed at least once a week, and proper odor neutralizing products should be used on any sprayed sites. You also have to review any reasons that might cause the cat to avoid the use of its litter box. See the lesson on litter box management.

If marking is stimulated by cats outside of the home, then the best option is to find a way

to deter the cats from coming on to the property or prevent the indoor cat from seeing, smelling, or hearing them. Remote control devices and booby traps can be used to deter outdoor cats from approaching and to keep indoor cats away from the areas where they are tempted to mark. Block visual access to windows or keep your cat away from that area of the house. It also may be necessary to keep windows closed to prevent the inside cat from smelling the cats outside, and to use odor neutralizers on any areas where the outdoor cats have eliminated or sprayed. Providing background sounds can help if the cat is hearing and concerned about a barking dog.

Multicat households are breeding grounds for spraying. When the number of cats in a home reaches 7 to 10, you will often have spraying problems. Cats that do not get along should be kept in separate parts of the home with their own litter boxes and sleeping areas. Reintroduction of the cats is possible if they are properly supervised. Allowing the cats together for positive experiences such as feeding (not next to each other), treats and play sessions, helps them to get used to the presence of each other, at least on a limited basis.

Cats are unlikely to spray in their feeding, sleeping or scratching areas. Put their food bowl where they have sprayed. A commercial product containing synthetic cheek gland scent (Feliway®) has proven to be an effective way of reducing urine marking in some cats. When sprayed on areas where cats have sprayed urine or on those areas where it can be anticipated that the cat is likely to spray, it may decrease the likelihood of additional spraying in those areas. It is available as a room diffuser or as a spray to be used directly on the area where your cat sprays. It has also been used to calm cats in new environments such as the shelter or veterinary hospital, while they become familiarized with a new cage or cat carrier.

Can I use medication to treat this problem?

Over the years, many pharmacological means have been tried to control spraying behaviors. The choices have focused on the theory that one of the underlying causes for spraying and marking behaviors is anxiety and territorial competition. For that reason, antidepressants such as clomipramine and fluoxetine have proven to be effective for controlling marking in some cats. This should be discussed with your veterinarian.

The key with housesoiling is to attack it early before the behavior becomes entrenched. If you are consulting a behaviorist, you'll need to know the frequency, duration and number of locations for urine marking. Are there multiple cats and are there any conflicts between them? Have there been changes in environment? Any new additions (people, pets, furniture, renovations)? These are part of the investigation that can help this person figure out how to help you the most.