

Behavior: Spraying

Cats sometimes engage in a behavior called urine spraying or urine marking. The cat stands, backs up to an object, holds his tail up erect and quivering, and releases urine out backwards onto the object. The urine sprayed differs chemically from the urine cats normally release from a squatting position because it also contains oily secretions from the anal glands. Sprayed urine is extremely pungent. Some people describe it as smelling like ammonia; others say it has a heavy musky odor. Cats occasionally spray from a squatting position.

Why do cats spray urine? They spray during territorial disputes, during aggressive conflicts, and during sexual encounters. The majority of cats who spray just do their spraying outside. They advertise their presence in a territory by spraying visually conspicuous sites. Cats “time share” territories, so the marks enable the cats to space themselves out so that they don’t often meet. Some cats spray urine inside their homes. Often indoor spraying results from conflicts between cats in the home or from the resident cat feeling threatened by outside cats.

Most often, cats who spray are reproductively intact males (toms) but females do sometimes spray. Neutering is the most effective way to curb spraying in a tomcat. In one study, 77 percent of cats stopped or significantly reduced spraying within six months of being neutered. Neutered cats can spray as well. Ten percent of male cats neutered before 10 months of age will still spray as adults. In households with numerous cats, at least one cat will likely spray, even if all the cats are neutered.

What to do:

- Neuter or spay the spraying cat.
- Identify the reasons why your cat may be spraying. For instance, if your cat is reacting to the sight of cats outside, block your cat’s view. If your cat is reacting to the scent of cats outside, possibly through a screen door or from odors on your shoes, prevent your cat from coming into contact with these scents. Keep the door closed and remove shoes outside, before entering the home.
- Discourage cats from hanging around outside your house. Motion-activated devices, such as the Critter Gitter™, the Scarecrow™, or the Scraminal™, all function to frighten outdoor cats away. The Scat Mat™ and the Sofa Saver™ can be used to keep outdoor cats away from doors and windows.
- If your cat is spraying in one or a few locations, you can make these areas less appealing, using some type of booby trap, such as Ssscat™. Ssscat™ is a motion-activated device that sprays the cat with a harmless but unpleasant aerosol.

Alternatively, you can put out an “unwelcome mat” for the cat by placing foil, plastic wrap, or upside-down vinyl carpet runner where your cat sprays. Be aware that cats often just choose a new spot to spray.



- You can also try eliciting a different behavior in the sprayed locations. Place items that stimulate behaviors incompatible with spraying, such as the food dish or toys, in the spots.
- You can try placing a litter box in each location. If the cat is spraying on the wall beside the litter box, try attaching a liner on the wall and drape it down into the box. Should the cat spray there, the urine at least will drip down into the box.
- Spray Feliway™ in the areas where your cat is spraying. Feliway™ is a synthetic pheromone designed to elicit calm, friendly behavior in cats. Research supports the claim that Feliway™ reduces indoor urine spraying.
- If the spraying is due to conflict among resident cats, you should seek counsel on resolving the conflict. You may need to separate the cats or at least isolate the spraying cat until you are able to restore harmony. If this is not possible, re-homing to reduce your numbers may be the only viable solution. A spraying cat might not spray at all in a new home with fewer cats.
- Drug therapy can help resolve a spraying problem. There are numerous medications that have been demonstrated to be effective in individual cases—e.g., the Benzodiazepines (i.e. Valium), other anti-anxiety drugs (i.e. Clomipramine or BuSpar), or progestins.
- Make sure you clean sprayed areas with an enzymatic cleanser designed to eliminate odors.
- If you can do so safely, allowing the cat to spend time outside sometimes results in the cat spraying outside the home rather than inside. Building a large wire enclosure for the cat outside may be sufficient to stimulate him to spray outdoors.

What not to do:

- Do not punish the cat by hitting, spanking, or slapping for spraying. Similarly, do not take the cat to the area and admonish him. This might well teach the cat to be afraid of you. The cat may actually spray more if he is stressed by the punishment.

Resolving Feline Spraying

Tiberius spies a new neighborhood cat investigating his backyard—an intruder on his turf! He backs up to a chair near the patio door, raises his tail and, with a quiver, lets fly with several quick squirts of foul-smelling urine. When finished, Ti resumes his business of patrolling for nonexistent rodents between long naps in the sun.

Get the Message?

Urine stains found approximately at cat-nose level on vertical surfaces, such as furniture, drapes or walls, are telltale signs of feline spraying. Urine marking is a method of olfactory signaling that may lay claim to territory, assert status (both high and low),

offer sexual availability or indicate stress or frustration. Spraying appears to be a form of communication that's aimed at other cats—or, in the case of frustration, more likely aimed at humans.

While most urine marking is accomplished via spraying, some cats may mark by squatting on horizontal surfaces. The marked site will offer a clue as to where the trouble lies. Spraying near doors or windows can be attributed to the stress of an indoor cat, like Ti, who spots an outside interloper on his or her territory. A marked suitcase can indicate stress over an impending vacation, signifying the owner's absence, an "invading" pet sitter, a change in routine, or worse: a stay at the boarding kennel.

A normal feline response, spraying is a difficult problem to eliminate. Also, backsliding in times of stress is not unusual. Most spraying is done by unneutered males, and by unspayed females in heat. Sterilization will yield a cessation of spraying within two weeks of surgery for all but roughly 10 percent of males and 5 percent of females. These numbers can be halved with proper treatment.

If your cat has sprayed, tackle the problem immediately. By ignoring the behavior, even for a few weeks, it becomes so ingrained that environmental and behavioral modification will not resolve the problem, and pharmacological intervention will be necessary.

If your neutered cat has sprayed, first attempt to determine the cause. Then, either remove it from his environment or cut off access to it. If the problem is household overcrowding, another home may be needed for your newest foster kitty. In Ti's case, a mesh fence-topper could be used to prevent other cats from climbing into the yard. Or, a motion detector could be installed to set off a garden hose or flashing lights to send feline invaders packing. Ti's guardians could install shades, shutters or other visual barriers to prevent him from witnessing others on his turf.

Marked areas must be carefully cleaned with a commercial odor neutralizer. Any lingering scent may encourage a cat to re-mark the spot to make his olfactory message clear. A strong win-

tergreen or citrus-scented room deodorizer may keep the cat away from the spot; however, it may also prompt him to spray elsewhere. Some have found success with the application of Feliway™, a synthetic feline facial pheromone analogue, sprayed near the marked areas one to three times a day. The spray is purported to have a calming effect on marking cats.

To change the cat's response to emotional triggers that cause spraying, couple some high-value treats with the presence of the stressors. Ply the cat with goodies stashed in the foyer if guests set him off. Feed him on or near your suitcase to foster pleasant connotations, and bring the luggage out even when a trip isn't imminent, to acclimate the cat to its presence.

If the behavior has become ingrained, drug therapy is needed. In the past, Valium® and progestins were most commonly prescribed. Today, buspirone and clomipramine have also become part of the arsenal used to combat spraying. Because virtually all drugs have both physical and behavioral side effects, the drug choice should be made in consultation with your veterinarian. Some cats can be weaned off the drugs; others need to stay on the regimen for life, to prevent lapsing into old behaviors when stressed or frustrated. Note: baseline tests should be performed before beginning the regimen, as well as follow-ups as needed, to ensure that the cat's organs are not damaged during drug therapy.

If your cat feels the need to express himself in urine, do not delay in your reply. If uncertain about the intent of the "message" or how to put a stop to his missives, seek out an applied animal behaviorist to help you unravel the mystery of your feline's mind.

If you need further assistance go to www.petsforlife.org,
www.mobilespca.org or email the Mobile SPCA
at spca@mobilespca.org



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