

Urine Marking in Cats

By Melissa Bain, DVM, DACVB

One of the most common behavior complaints about cats is urine marking, or spraying. It is also a common reason why healthy cats are relinquished to shelters (and consequently euthanized). You should take heart, however, since this problem can almost always be adequately managed. You should also take heart from the fact that this problem is widespread – you are not alone.



Is urine marking different from inappropriate elimination?

Urine marking is not the same thing as inappropriate elimination. You must have the problem definitively diagnosed by your veterinarian, since the treatment for each condition varies. Here's how to tell the difference:

Cats who urine mark will urinate mostly on vertical surfaces, though they sometimes mark horizontal surfaces, too. They deposit small amounts of urine, and display a typical posture while marking, which includes backing up to the object, lifting and often quivering the tail, and treading with the back feet.

Inappropriately eliminating cats will urinate or defecate on horizontal surfaces only, with large amounts of urine deposited and with the definitive urinating posture of squatting to eliminate. The cat may stop using the litter box and urinate and/or defecate in other areas of the house. Sometimes the cat will eliminate both inside and outside the box, or use the box for urination or defecation only.

Why do cats spray?

Urine spraying or marking by cats is a normal behavior. It is used as a means of communication between cats, and also serves to make their own territory smell familiar to them. In a multiple-cat household, competition over resources may be a source of conflict, and could trigger urine marking behavior.

Can my veterinarian help with this problem?

Your veterinarian can diagnose whether the problem is indeed urine marking and he or she should also rule out any medical diseases. Even though cats who urine mark have been shown to be no more likely than cats who do not urine mark to have abnormalities on a urinalysis, medical causes can contribute to the underlying stress or anxiety that a cat may be experiencing. Urinary tract infections, metabolic diseases, and neurological disorders may play a role in starting or continuing the problem.

Drug therapy has been effective in managing urine marking in cats, but they will go back to urine marking after withdrawing from the medication if behavior modification is not also done. Medication should be used in addition to behavior modification techniques in cats who have not responded to behavior modification alone. Consult with your veterinarian about this option.

What can I do to alleviate the problem?

Studies have shown that proper litter box management and cleaning have a significant effect on decreasing urine marking in cats. First, make the litter box as attractive as possible. Keep the litter box immaculate by scooping daily and cleaning the entire box every week or two with mild soap and water, rinsing completely. The box should be large enough to accommodate the cat – most litter boxes on the market are too small. The plastic storage boxes designed to fit under a bed are often a better choice. Don't use covered litter boxes, since many cats find them too confining. (Also, if the dirty litter box is out of sight, you might not clean it as regularly!)

Second, make sure you have enough litter boxes. The ideal number of litter boxes is one per cat, plus one. Spread the boxes around the house. Cats don't like to be disturbed while in the litter box, so put the boxes in quiet, less trafficked areas (not next to the washing machine and dryer, for instance). Don't put a litter box near the cat's food and water dishes.

Next, you can work on discouraging your cat from urine marking. Try placing a litter box in the area where the cat is spraying, and gradually, inch by inch, move the box to a more appropriate area after the cat is using it consistently. You can also try placing the cat's food or toys over that area.

Another option is to make the inappropriate area inaccessible, at least for a while. If it is not feasible to block off the area, there are ways to make the area aversive to the cat. Try using one of the following on the spot: plastic carpet runners placed upside down, tinfoil, heavy plastic, contact paper with the sticky side up, strong-smelling potpourri, solid-type room deodorizers, or cologne.

The odor left behind in the soiled area should be removed by using an enzyme-based cleaner, since they are designed to eradicate the odor-causing bacteria. Avoid using anything containing ammonia, or any other household cleaner.

If you have a multiple-cat household, and you think competition over resources may be a source of conflict, try creating an "atmosphere of plenty." Place food, water and litter boxes in multiple areas throughout the house to give your cats access to these resources without having to enter another cat's "territory."

Other factors can cause stress in your cat and consequently influence urine marking: new cats or people in the neighborhood or household; a change in the daily routine; or anything else that causes stress or anxiety in your cat. You may be able to lessen the source of stress by blocking the windows from which your cat can view the outside roaming cats, or preventing the neighborhood cats from coming into the yard.

What do I do if I catch my kitty in the act?

If you catch the cat in the act of spraying, don't ever directly punish your cat by yelling, physically punishing the cat, or rubbing the cat's nose in it. Direct punishment will not solve the problem. Indirect punishment, such as using a squirt gun or tossing a towel toward the cat, may disrupt the cat's behavior temporarily, but to be completely effective, the punishment must occur when the cat *begins* the behavior (not halfway through or afterward), it must happen every time, and the cat must not see you deliver the punishment. Since these conditions are pretty difficult to achieve, it's probably best not to use any form of punishment if you catch your kitty in the act.

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