

The Spraying Cat - Marking Behaviour

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WHY cats Spray:

Spraying is a form of territorial marking which allows cats to communicate with each other. The smell of the urine identifies the cat, its territory and its reproductive status to other cats. It is most commonly performed by intact males, although females (especially those in heat) and neutered cats may also spray.

HOW cats Spray:

The male cat backs up to a vertical surface, such as a wall or a piece of furniture, with his tail straight up and the tip twitching. He may tread with his front feet only, or with all four feet. In rare cases, both male and female cats will spray from a squatting position.

Spraying cats eliminate small amounts of urine at a time. The cat usually sprays in only a few specific areas. Although spraying most commonly occurs on vertical objects, it may also occur on horizontal surfaces like floors, furniture, or stove tops.

Some cats mark by urinating, emptying the bladder, or by defecation. This type of marking is usually on concentrations of human pheromones (body odour) such as on a bed, dirty clothes, bath mats, bath tubs, or a sofa. The pheromones covered by urine or stool are usually specific to the human with whom the cat has a conflict.

CAUSES of Spraying:

There are four main reasons that cats spray:

1. Spraying most commonly reflects environmental stress or anxiety. Situations which may cause spraying for this reason are:
 - the smell, sound or sight of another cat; as the number of cats in the environment increases, so does the social competition which causes spraying. The other cats may be stray or neighbourhood cats that are coming into your yard, or if you own more than one cat, house mates of your cat (regardless of how well they seem to get along)
 - moving to a new house
 - new people in the house, or someone moving out of the house
 - changes in your work schedule
 - the addition of new pets (especially cats) to the household
 - construction, rearranging furniture, changing the location of the cat's food or litter-box
 - if the cat is spraying on a person's bed or laundry, the conflict is related to that person (eg. Separation anxiety).
2. Once an area has been sprayed by your cat or another cat, the smell of previously soiled areas will compel any cat to re-spray the same area.
3. The male hormone testosterone is often a contributing cause of marking. Intact males spray the most, and females in heat spray more commonly than spayed females.

4. Genetics are important. There seems to be an inherited predisposition to mark territory and for susceptibility to anxiety.

There is no evidence that diseases such as cystitis influence the occurrence of marking behavior.

All of the above are additive. To stop a cat from marking, you will have to address all potential causes simultaneously.

TREATMENT for Spraying:

1. If your spraying cat is an un-neutered male or female, the most effective way of dealing with the problem is by castrating or spaying the cat. Castration of males is 90% effective in stopping spraying, regardless of the cat's age or experience. Spaying usually stops a female that is marking while in heat, and will often help control a spraying male in the environment.
2. Environmental causes of spraying are extremely common, and the most difficult to deal with. If you have several cats, you should find homes for one or more of them; the spraying cat is often happiest as an "only cat". If you suspect that neighbourhood cats are stimulating territorial behaviour in your cat, you can keep them away by burying mothballs about ½ " deep in the soil around your foundations. Try keeping cats off the outside windowsills with mothballs or UPSIDE DOWN mousetraps. It is often helpful to cover the windows, so your cat can't see other cats. If your cat is used to going outside, spraying behaviour will often decrease if it becomes an indoor cat. It is important to think of and address all possible sources of environmental conflict for the cat, as 2 or 3 things often add together to cause the cat's spraying response. Consider particularly any changes that occurred in your house about the time the spraying started.
3. Cleaning is extremely important in preventing further spraying. The cat's sense of smell is much more sensitive than ours, so the cat will still be able to smell urine, even if you cannot. However, you can mask the smell effectively to keep the cat away from soiled areas.

If the cat has sprayed on hard surfaces, clean the area thoroughly, then wipe on a solution of 1 part Dettol mixed in 4 parts water. Repeat every 4 days for a month.

If the cat has sprayed on carpet, rugs, or upholstered furniture, clean the area and then rub a small amount of mothball crystals (1/4 teaspoon) deep into the pile of the carpet. You should not be able to smell mothballs when you walk into the room (a little goes a long way due to the cat's extremely sensitive sense of smell). The mothball crystals should be reapplied every 5-7 days if they are to continue to keep the cat away. DO NOT use vinegar or ammonia to clean, as they may smell like urine to the cat.

3. It is usually necessary that your veterinarian prescribe an anti-anxiety drug like diazepam or amitriptyline. These medications are in pill form and require some experimentation to arrive at the correct dose for the individual pet. You should realize however, that drugs do not solve the problem. For a successful treatment you must determine what is bothering your cat and deal with the cause.
4. PUNISHMENT DOES NOT WORK. It will not stop the cat from spraying. In fact, punishment generally increases marking and may cause the cat to avoid you. Your cat is driven to spray by some conflict in his life. He is not doing it to get back at you for something, or out of spite.

Spraying is one of the most common behaviour problems in cats. The success of the treatment depends on how well you are able to identify and rectify the situations in your house which may be causing your cat to spray. We are here to help however we can. Please call if you have problems or questions.

613-634-7123

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