

Spraying - urine marking in the house



Cats are usually meticulous in their toileting habits and seldom soil or mark indoors. It is not surprising that when your cat does do this you may be upset and unsure about what to do. Understanding the reasons why cats can sometimes soil in the house may help to tackle the problem. In most cases this occurs because the cat is anxious or unsettled.

How do I know if my cat is spraying?

Your cat uses both urine and faeces (droppings) to mark its territory. This gives information to other cats about the sex, age, state of health, etc of your cat and warns them to keep away. It is also reassuring for your cat to be surrounded by its own familiar smell. When a cat is scent marking with urine it does not squat. A spraying cat stands up facing away from the object it is marking and squirts just a few drops of urine backwards. The tail is raised vertically and the tip will probably flick from side to side. The reasons for a cat spraying indoors (using urine as a marker) are quite different from those that make it urinate indoors and it is important to differentiate between the two.

Will my cat spray?

All cats, male or female, neutered or un-neutered are likely to spray outdoors. Un-neutered animals are far more likely to spray. Having any cat neutered will reduce the risk of problems but spraying may still occur for emotional rather than sexual reasons.

Why doesn't my cat use its litter tray?

On some occasions a fully housetrained cat causes problems, not through spraying but because it has decided to use somewhere other than its litter tray to go to the toilet. This usually means that it is not happy using the litter tray. Cats are choosy where they relieve themselves and like somewhere clean and quiet. If the litter is dirty, the tray too close to the cat's feeding or sleeping area or in full view of the rest of the room your cat may refuse to use the tray. Sometimes you just need to put in a deeper layer of litter or change the brand used. This behaviour is quite different from spraying.

Can spraying be caused by an illness?

Indoor spraying occurs due to psychological disturbance in your cat. Your vet may want to check your cat for various conditions such as diabetes, kidney disease, bladder problems, etc which may cause it to urinate in the wrong place at the wrong time, but these diseases will not make your cat spray.

Will punishment solve the problem?

It is only natural to be annoyed when you find that your cat has soiled inside your home. But shouting at it or rubbing its nose in the mess will not stop it happening again. Your cat will not understand why you are upset. It is likely that your cat sprayed because it was frightened or insecure, so punishment will only make this worse.

Where will my cat spray?

Cats usually spray against a vertical surface at the entrance to the house or room - door frames are a favourite spot. They can mark anywhere such as pieces of furniture, curtains or household equipment. Sometimes cats will mark any unfamiliar object which has been brought into the home and occasionally even people may be sprayed!

How do I get rid of the smell?

Rub down the affected area with a damp cloth and then use a biological odour eliminator. Your vet will be able to recommend a suitable product. Standard disinfectants are not very useful. Some contain ammonia (a normal constituent of cat urine) and this will make your cat think that another cat has marked over its spot and may encourage it to re-spray the area. Unfortunately the smell may persist for up to 4 weeks despite your best efforts at cleaning. Using a natural cat scent spray (pheromone) in the area may make your cat less likely to spray there again. These scents can be detected by cats but cannot be detected by people. When the area is clean move your cat's feeding bowl nearby as cats will not spray near their eating area. Make sure the food bowl is filled with dry food (not canned food which will go stale).

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Remember, unless the reason for spraying is removed your cat may simply start spraying elsewhere.

Can the spraying be stopped?

If you can find out why your cat is spraying there is a good chance it can be stopped. This may need thorough detective work by you and your vet. Perhaps an aggressive new cat has moved into the area and your cat feels threatened? A rival cat may even have come into your house through your cat flap. If you have bought a new kitten or a dog, or there is a new baby in the house, an older cat can feel nervous.

Sometimes it helps to give your cat the security of having a small territory completely to itself. It is sometimes useful to shut off the cat flap and let your cat in and out yourself - this way your cat will feel that its indoor den is secure and safe from intruders. Keep its bed, litter tray and water bowl in a room where it can feel safe. Treating areas where your cat spends a lot of time with a pheromone (natural cat scent) may make your cat more relaxed. Let it out regularly for food and give extra affection (even if you already give it plenty) but watch it carefully. Once the problem is controlled you can reintroduce your cat to the rest of the house gradually, room by room.

Can drugs help stop spraying?

Sometimes your vet will suggest drugs to tackle the anxiety that is causing your cat to spray. These drugs may help in the short-term but it is vital to work out the underlying reason why your cat is unhappy. If the problem is complicated or persistent you may need the help of an animal psychologist (usually called a pet behavioural consultant). Your vet will be able to put you in touch with one.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact Hampden Veterinary Hospital on 01296 423666 and we will be happy to advise you.