

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Spraying (Urine Marking)

Cats use scent to communicate with the world around them. It also allows them to pick up information about other cats in the environment. Spraying (also known as urine marking) is a tool cats use to indirectly share information when they're faced with varying situations. Cats can spray when they're looking for a mate, when they're distressed, to claim property, or to let other cats know they are present (to avoid potential conflict and/or keep unwanted visitors away). Many cat owners mistake spraying as a litter box problem, but it's actually a communication matter.

Cats try to avoid face-to-face confrontations because it risks putting them in danger if they get into an altercation. Spraying allows them to leave messages for other cats about their current situation. When another cat comes across these messages written in urine, they pick up information about the cat who left it. Spraying is ultimately a method of indirect communication.

Does my cat have a communication problem or litter box problem?

It's easy to confuse spraying with regular urination since they both involve urine. When cats spray, they typically back up to a vertical surface before they shoot urine out, creating streak-like marks. Their tail and body often quivers or twitch during this practice. When cats urinate, however, they usually squat down and form puddles on a horizontal surface. The amount of urine deposited while spraying is typically less than when they're urinating. The smell of the urine when spraying is more pungent compared to regular urine because it also comprises of communication chemicals. It's these additional elements that allow other cats to gather information from the urine mark.

My indoor cat is spraying, how can I prevent this?

Vet visit: It is always recommended to rule out any potential medical issues by taking your cat to the vet. Having an ailment can be distressing for a cat, which may cause them to spray. Once you're able to rule out possible medical problems, you can then take steps to eliminate spraying.

Tip: *The dye may stain light colored surfaces or furniture. Remove any treasured items from the room to prevent light green stains.*

Find the culprit: In order to determine which cat is spraying in a multi-cat home, temporarily confine your cats one at a time. This method may not work if isolating the cat removes them from the stressor. If you're unable to figure out which cat is spraying after separation, talk to your vet about prescribing Fluorescein, a harmless dye, which will make a cat's urine appear bright green under a black light. Offer this to one cat at a time, and you'll have your culprit when you find new glowing urine marks.

Spay/Neuter: Unaltered cats spray to look for potential mates. Although cats may spray for other reasons, if there is a chance your cat is marking to advertise reproductive availability, getting them fixed is a recommended treatment. It's best to spay or neuter your cat as soon as possible because the longer you wait, the more likely the marking behavior will become ingrained.

Clean up: Use an enzymatic cleaner, like Nature's Miracle, to clean the surfaces your cat is spraying on to remove any traces of the odor. Cats have keen noses, if the smell of urine persists they'll likely spray in the same area again. On top of scooping the litter box daily, try to clean the litter box regularly with soap and water to remove any scent left by the stress-induced cat.

Prevent potential conflicts: Make sure all your cats have equal access to their resources. Spraying is a way for cats to draw boundaries and settle disputes. Potential conflicts will be greatly reduced if these resources are spread around the home; the cats will have several opportunities to get what they need, without the need to come into contact with another cat. Provide one litter box for each cat, plus one more to prevent conflict over litter box use. It'll also help to have additional feeding stations, scratching posts, and toys in areas the culprit cat tends to spend most of their time. Providing multiple perches and cat trees will give your cats the option to unwind away from other pets. Vertical space will also consequently double the size of your home in your cats' eyes, which means there is less territory to share.

If you have a dog living in the home, do your best to block the dog's access to the cat's resources, especially the feeding stations and litter boxes. If that isn't possible, restricting the dog's access to the resources is the next best thing.

If your cat seems to be spraying a specific door or window, chances are they're troubled from seeing/smelling outdoor cats hanging around the home. Take steps to block your cat's visual access by using window films, closing windows and blinds, or moving your cat's perch to another area. You can also set up a motion-detector sprinkler or an ultrasonic cat deterrent to discourage neighborhood cats from coming near your home.

Build confidence: Cats may spray if they feel stressed or insecure in their environment. Because cats prefer having routines, changes in the environment, no matter how small, may cause distress. Playing is a great way to help build confidence. If your cat is avoiding certain areas in the home, entice them to play in those areas using a wand-type toy. Wand type toys are great because they can bring out a cat's natural predatory instincts and allow for vigorous and stimulating exercise. When a cat is able to stalk, capture, and kill (the toy) it relieves stress and boosts their confidence. If they prefer treats over playing, make a trail of treats to encourage them to explore. They'll learn that positive things (treats) are out there, all they have to do is explore.

Use Pheromones: Feliway is a synthetic calming pheromone that is used to help reduce stress. This pheromone can be purchased as sprays or diffusers online or pet stores. Place the diffusers in the areas your cat is spraying. It can also help create harmony between cats.

Related flyers: *"Inappropriate Elimination, Stress in Cats, Helping a Fearful Cat"*

Source:

<https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/cat-care/common-cat-behavior-issues/urine-marking-cats>

https://www.petmd.com/cat/conditions/behavioral/c_ct_house_soiling

<https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/cat-marking-territory>

For more information:

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <https://m.iaabc.org/>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>