

If Cats Could Only Write

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 unsprayed 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.

Point Taken

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 wintergreen 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.

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