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## **INDOOR SPRAYING IN CATS**

### **What is spraying?**

Urine spraying is part of the cat's normal scent-marking behavioural repertoire which also includes scratching, rubbing, chinning, bunting (depositing secretions from head glands on twigs etc.), and middening (leaving faeces uncovered). Using these scent markers cats can deter others from their range and cats which share a hunting range can avoid one another without coming into direct conflict. Spraying is also designed to help females in oestrus ('in season' or 'on heat') to attract males for breeding. When spraying the cat stands with its tail vertical (often quivering at the tip) while it delivers a squirt of urine backwards onto a vertical surface. This spray probably contains information about sex, age, hormonal state, assertiveness and general health.

### **Why do cats spray?**

Cats may spray when frustrated, upset or subject to competition or challenge and spraying can be interpreted as the cat increasing its own sense of security by surrounding itself with signals of its own occupancy in its territory. The more anxious the individual, the more he or she will need familiar odours for comfort.

### **Do only tom cats spray?**

No, all cats, male or female, neutered or not, may spray, usually outside where we may not see them. Un-neutered toms and queens in oestrus will spray more.

### **Why do cats spray indoors?**

Most neutered pet cats feel sufficiently relaxed in their own home and do not spray. They identify it by rubbing scent from their body and do not need to mark by spraying, scratching or middening. The most common sites for indoor spraying are near entrances to the house or room, curtains and new items brought into the house, e.g., plastic bags, new furniture etc., although individuals may have their own idiosyncratic targets such as washing machines, video players or even certain people! As with most behavioural problems a little detective work may be needed to get to the root of the behaviour problem. While there may be no 'quick fix' solution in some cases, helping to find and understand the motivation for the behaviour will help while you work towards a solution.

There can be many triggers for a cat marking indoors:-

1. The arrival of a new cat, dog or person in the family, or a bereavement.
2. Changes in the home area such as furniture or new carpets. Disruptions such as building work.
3. Installation of a cat flap which can make the cat feel insecure indoors.
4. In rare cases, spraying can be a learned attention-getting behaviour.

Occasionally urine marking may be carried out from a squatting position usually on the floor, but often on bedcovers or chairs. The cat may still use the litter tray for eliminating larger volumes of urine. This often occurs when owners leave their cat at home but in their neighbour's care when they go on holiday and may be a form of 'associative' marking - the cat feeling anxious because it is alone, is relieved when it associates its smell with that of the owner - usually in a spot where the owner's smell is concentrated such as on the bed or armchair.

### **Can the problem be treated?**

Cats marking indoors clearly require a clear and extensive approach to diagnosis of cause(s) and careful development of treatment which will not unsettle them even more! It is vital to discover under which situations the problems occur as treatment often depends on defining any specific anxiety-inducing trigger(s) for the behaviour.

It is useful to know the following:-

1. When did the problem first occur?
2. Which people or other animals are normally present in the house. What are the attitudes of all the family towards the cat. What are they doing before, during and after the problem occurs.
3. Are there any other behaviour problems in the cat or its feline housemates and is it receiving any medical treatment?
4. Where is the marking occurring? The layout of the house and even the garden may be important. Are there rival cats outside?
5. What is the cat's daily routine? Does it have free access to outside? Where does it eat and sleep, how much time is spent interacting with the owner and what do they do together.
6. What methods have already been tried to solve the problem? How are the marks cleaned?

The main aim of treatment is to reduce the perceived threat to the cat and make it feel more secure in its home territory, thus reducing its levels of arousal and curtailing the need to scent mark. Identifiable sources of stress should be removed, e.g., by excluding local rival cats from entering the home by blocking the cat flap or replacing it with a selective one. Carefully introduced friendly routines of handling, feeding and playing

will help provide reassurance, providing such contact does not further alarm the cat at any stage. In many cases there may be no single obvious threat and the cat's behaviour may be the result of the cumulative effect of several influences. If such sources of stress cannot be removed or even fully identified the cat should be provided with a safe haven of a small core territory of one room in the house to which it can safely retreat or be placed to relax without fear of disturbance for regular periods and where it should only feel the need to mark normally by rubbing and bunting.

Often people simply become 'over-catted' - they enjoy their feline housemates and because one extra takes up little more physical space and is no more effort to feed, they will continue to collect more. This may be fine until a certain mix of characters just doesn't gel and relations within the group become strained and spraying begins. Careful introductions can help but **sometimes certain individuals simply cannot share a home without stress** and it is better to re home one or more. Although this may not be a popular decision, it may be the only option if home hygiene is to be maintained as trying to manage the problems can be very difficult with a number of cats and associated variables.

All forms of punishment should be discontinued (even if the cat is 'caught in the act') as this is only likely to raise the cat's level of arousal and anxiety. You may feel often angry and want to react if you catch the cat 'in the act', however, stopping all punishment and threatening behaviour is an essential first step towards improvement.

Placing food (dry food is best) or a bed at the base of spraying sites is often helpful at protecting those particular areas as cats are extremely reluctant to spray their own key resources, although they may simply move to other areas and mark there instead. Food and beds are also reassuring and may reduce anxiety.

Spraying can be triggered by the smell of previous marks so marked areas should be thoroughly cleaned (not with ammonia-based products as ammonia is a constituent of cat urine). A damp cloth should be used to remove any fresh urine marks and while some commercially available 'urine digester' products remove the smell (to the sensitivity of the human nose at least), no data has been published on relative efficacies. An enzymatic or biological washing powder or liquid may be just as effective at removing residues. Follow with agitation using a light brush with a low grade alcohol (test the colour fastness of material/carpets first).

It is unlikely that spraying will be effectively resolved with drugs without trying to ascertain the cause of the problem and without employing management changes and behaviour modifications. Some drugs are available but their use should be based on sound understanding of the problem cat and the effects of the drug on the feline physiology. Drugs should alter a cat's mood to enable it to learn new forms of behaviour and the drugs should then be withdrawn. There is a drug called buspirone which is quite effective, but if used as the only form of therapy, rarely produces a long-term cure.