

WHY IS MY CAT SPRAYING?

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When spraying behavior occurs, it can put the cat at risk of being sent to the shelter, given away, put outdoors, or sadly, it can result in euthanasia. If you don't understand the reasons a cat may spray then you won't understand how to effectively deal with it. When I work with clients, I find many people misunderstand the reasons behind spray-marking behavior. The behavior is often just labeled as territorial marking but that isn't the sole reason cats spray. To resolve the issue you need to determine the underlying cause. Spraying isn't just about marking turf.

Note: when dealing with any behavior involving cats not using the litter box, it's critical that a veterinary exam is done. Even if you're positive the problem is behavioral, rule out underlying medical causes first to prevent unnecessary pain and suffering.

What the Difference Between Spraying and Normal Urination?

There is a difference. A cat urinating outside of the litter box isn't necessarily spraying. These are two separate behaviors. Typical urination is usually done on a horizontal surface. Spraying is usually displayed against vertical objects, although there are some cats who will spray even when there isn't a vertical target within range. In this case, the sprayed urine forms a thin line as opposed to the round puddle of normal urination.



Photo by Erika on Unsplash

The cat's position for spray-marking is not the same as for typical urination. When he's about to spray, a cat backs up to the target object, the tail twitches and he starts lightly treading his front paws. Some cats squint or close their eyes during spray-marking behavior. The posture for normal urination is squatting, whether the cat is male or female.

When urination outside of the litter box occurs, there could be an underlying medical cause or perhaps the litter box conditions are not up to speed. If the problem is medical, it could be the cat associates the box with his pain or maybe

he can't make it to the box in time. Dynamics in the household could also be causing stress as well and that could trigger the cat to not feel safe in the box. For example, in a multicat household, one cat may repeatedly get ambushed in the box or perhaps the family dog keeps sticking his nose in the box. There are many reasons a cat may not feel comfortable using the litter box.

It's important to identify which behavior your cat is displaying. If you're unsure, talk to your veterinarian.

Spraying is About Communication

The cat is trying to communicate when he sprays. Both male and female cats can spray, which may surprise you. The pheromones in sprayed urine contain vital information about the sprayer. It's like leaving an olfactory business card. Even though you certainly don't want spraying to occur in your home, don't view it as a spiteful behavior. It's a normal cat reaction to a particular situation in the current environment. Your job is to figure out what the cat is saying so you can fix the problem.

Some common reasons for spraying behavior:

- To define perimeter
- A cat might spray new objects in the environment to create familiarity
- To create a comforting, familiar scent in his territory
- Spraying can be a challenge to another cat
- A cat might spray a family member's clothing as a comforting way to mix scents
- A cat may spray a new family member's personal items to form a bond
- A cat may spray a family member's belongings if there has been a schedule change or something about the person's normal behavior has changed
- Spraying in intact males occurs as a sign of sexual availability and to warn other males that he's on the scene
- A cat might spray a new family member's items if he's unsure whether the person is a threat
- A cat may spray if he is not able to get to another cat who may pose a threat (typical example: the appearance of a strange cat in the yard)
- Spraying may be displayed due to anxiety, even if you don't see an obvious trigger
- It is sometimes used as a victory display after a tense encounter with another cat
- A fearful cat may spray when he knows no other cats are around so he can avoid conflict

Confident and non-confident cats may spray. A confident cat may use the behavior as a victory display after a stand-off or fight with another cat. A less-confident cat depends on it as a way to display aggression without having to risk a physical encounter. It's a way to warn and also see what kind of response he gets without putting himself at risk.

The sprayed urine contains pheromones that reveal information such as age, sexual availability and status. This information is vital in an outdoor environment where unfamiliar cats roam. Cats want to limit physical fights so they use spraying (as well as scratch-marking and posturing) as an initial communication network.



Photo by Randy Lu on Unsplash

Not all cats spray. Gradually ease your cat through changes in his environment, such as the introduction of a new cat, new spouse, new baby or a move to a new home, and you will reduce the chances of spraying behavior. If your cat hasn't been neutered, keep in mind that he WILL spray if he hasn't started already. Talk to your veterinarian about having him neutered. In almost all cases, neutering will end spraying behavior.

Dealing with a Cat Who Sprays

If you live with more than one cat, you need to know which one is doing the spraying. Of course, you could be unfortunate enough to have a couple of cats participating. Unless you see the cat engaging in the behavior, the best identification method is through video surveillance. You can find inexpensive home security cameras just about everywhere and they connect with your smart phone. It's worth the purchase because you will see not only who is spraying but what may have triggered it.

- Clean sprayed area with an enzymatic product formulated for cleaning and neutralizing cat urine and odor
 - Conduct play sessions there so it becomes a positive area for the cat
 - Use a synthetic pheromone spray near the areas to help change the cat's association
 - If furniture is being sprayed, cover the area with a shower curtain liner temporarily if needed, to reduce damage
 - In some cases, you might have to close off the location while working with the cat
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- Reduce household stress
 - Add more vertical locations to increase indoor territory
 - In a multicat environment make sure each cat has resources in their own preferred core areas
 - There should be more litter boxes than cats in the home
 - In a multicat environment set up multiple feeding stations
 - If your cat is about to spray, distract him with an enticing sound to change his mindset from negative to positive
 - conduct interactive play sessions at least twice a day to increase confidence and security
 - Evaluate your environmental enrichment and tweak, where needed
 - Cats may need to be separated so a reintroduction can be done
 - If the cat is spraying a family member's items, have that family member be the one who offers the meals and conducts play sessions
 - If the cat is spraying a family member's items, use a pheromone spray on the belongings so the cat thinks he has facially rubbed there
 - Ease your cat through changes



Photo by Tatiana Rodriguez on Unsplash

If areas have been repeatedly sprayed, put litter boxes there that have high sides (but not covered boxes) and you might find the cat will be content with spraying inside the litter box.

If the appearance of a strange outdoor cat is the problem, block your indoor cat's view of those windows with opaque window paper. If the appearance of an outdoor cat is a real problem, you may have to look into cat-proof fencing or try motion-activated sprinklers.

Never Use Punishment

The information I've provided is very general because you have to take your specific situation into consideration. Keep in mind that your cat is not misbehaving so don't do any form of punishment. Your cat isn't willfully doing something to make you mad. Spraying is a normal feline reaction to a stressful or uncertain situation. Figure out what is concerning your cat so you can provide a solution.



Photo by Chris Nemeth

Professional Behavior Help

Talk with your veterinarian if you're struggling to figure out the cause of your cat's spraying behavior. Your veterinarian may refer you to a veterinary behaviorist, certified applied animal behaviorist or a certified cat behavior consultant. A qualified professional can help determine the cause and establish a behavior plan for you.

Need More Help?

For more specific information on cat behavior and training, refer to my books, *Think Like a Cat* and *CatWise*. You can also check out the book *Cat vs. Cat*, which deals exclusively with multicat issues. The books are available at bookstores everywhere, through your favorite online book retail site and on the website, catbehaviorassociates.com. If you have a question regarding

your cat's health, please contact your veterinarian. This article is not intended as a replacement for your cat's veterinary care and is not dispensing medical advice.

About Pam Johnson-Bennett, CCBC

Pam is a Certified Cat Behavior Consultant and best-selling author of 8 books on cat behavior. She starred in the Animal Planet series *Psycho Kitty*, seen in Canada and the UK. She was vice president of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and founded their Cat Division, where she served 8 years as Chair. She has served on advisory boards for the American Humane Association as well as other animal welfare organizations. She lectures internationally on cat behavior and makes frequent television and radio appearances. Previously, she was the cat behavior columnist for *Cats* magazine, *Modern Cat* magazine, *The Daily Cat*, and *Cat Fancy* online. She was also the resident cat behavior expert for Yahoo and iVillage online. She is considered a pioneer in the field of cat behavior consulting, having started her career in 1982. Some of her books are used as textbooks in behavior courses and she has influenced many practicing in the field today. Her ground-breaking book, *Think Like a Cat*, is considered the cat bible by veterinarians, shelters, and cat owners worldwide.

Pam owns Cat Behavior Associates, LLC, a veterinarian-referred cat behavior consultation business in Nashville, TN.