

SOUTH COAST VET CARE

TALKING ANIMALS ~ INDOOR SPRAYING BY CATS

Urine spraying is one of the cat's normal scent-marking behaviours, which also include scratching, rubbing, chinning, bunting (depositing secretions from head glands on twigs etc.) and middening (leaving faeces uncovered). By using these scent markers cats can deter others from their home range, and cats which share a hunting range can avoid one another without coming into direct conflict. Spraying is also designed to help females 'on heat' to attract males for breeding. The cat stands with its tail vertical (often quivering at the tip) and squirts urine backwards onto a vertical surface.

Cats may spray when frustrated, upset or subject to competition or challenge. 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. All cats, male or female, neutered or not, may spray, usually outside, but undesexed toms and queens in oestrus will spray more.

Most neutered pet cats feel sufficiently relaxed in their own home not to spray. They identify it instead by rubbing scent from their body. 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. While there may be no 'quick fix' solution in some cases, helping to find and understand the motivation for the behaviour will help you to work towards a solution.

There can be many triggers for a cat marking indoors such as the arrival of a new cat, dog or person into the family, or a bereavement; changes in the home area such as furniture or new carpets; disruptions such as building work; or installation of a cat flap which can make the cat feel insecure indoors. In rare cases, spraying can be a learned attention-getting behaviour. Occasional 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.

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 in defining any specific anxiety-inducing trigger(s) for the behaviour.

Some of the following questions are helpful. When did the problem first occur? 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? Are there any other behaviour problems in the cat or its feline housemates and is it receiving any medical treatment? Where is the marking occurring? The layout of the house and even the garden may be important. Are there rival cats outside? 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? What methods have already been tried to solve the problem? How are the marks cleaned?