



# Maidstone Veterinary Clinic

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## INDOOR SPRAYING IN CATS

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). By 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. This spray probably contains information about sex, age, hormonal state, assertiveness and general health.

Spraying is also designed to help females in oestrus ('in season' or 'on heat') to attract males for breeding and neutered cats will also spray if threatened.

When spraying, the cat will stand with its tail vertical (often quivering at the tip) while it delivers a squirt of urine backwards onto a vertical surface.

### **WHY DO CATS SPRAY?**

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 stronger signals of its own occupancy in its territory. The more anxious the individual, the more he or she will need familiar odours in its surroundings for comfort.

### **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. Spraying is only likely to occur if the cat feels threatened or insecure in its environment.

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

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

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. Individuals may even have their own idiosyncratic targets such as washing machines, video players or even certain people!

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 eg. when they go on holiday. This 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. It usually marks a spot where the owner's smell is concentrated such as on the bed or armchair.

### **CAN THE PROBLEM BE TREATED?**

Indoor spraying can be a frustrating and expensive problem. There are no sure methods of stopping it from occurring but clues as to why spraying has started can be found with some thought.

Consider the following:

- **WHERE** does the cat spray?  
i.e. by the door (outdoor threat), on the lounge furniture (indoor threat), on certain family members' possessions (separation anxiety).
- **WHAT** has started the cat spraying?  
i.e. any changes in family or neighbourhood dynamics either animal or human, any changes to the home environment, any concurrent illness, has access to indoors or outdoors changed.
- **WHEN** does the spraying occur?  
i.e. in the owners presence, when the cat is being ignored (after which it receives attention), at the time of household alterations.

If most of these questions can be answered it is usually possible to establish the cause of anxiety. **For any additional therapy to be successful it is necessary to ensure that the initiating factor causing anxiety is removed.** For example, if neighbouring cats are entering the house, block their entry: electromagnetic cat flaps which only your cat can open by means of a collar magnet are effective for this. If the problem is a persistent stray that you are sure is unowned the best approach is to trap the offending cat and place them in the care of the SPCA.

Sometimes alleviating stress is difficult. Where new furniture is the problem using an artificial pheromone spray (*Feliway*) on the offending articles to mimic the scent of cheek secretions can create a sense of well being and encourage the cat to mark by bunting rather than spraying. Such pheromones are usually quite effective and need only be applied in tiny amounts and are also useful in cases where spraying of old furniture has commenced.

It is a clinically established fact that the larger the number of cats in the household the more likely that spraying will occur. Since the initiating stress factor in these situations is the presence of other household cats, often even medical therapy will not cease spraying, and the best method of therapy is to rehome either some (possibly all) of the other cats, or the offender to a consenting catless household (critical threshold is often 3 - 4 cats and will depend on cats and house size).

### **MEDICAL THERAPY**

Sometimes even with stress reduction, spraying will continue and medical intervention is required to help achieve a sense of calm to enable the cat to readjust to the improved surroundings.

Drugs used in the management of spraying are anti-depressant in action so whilst they create a sense of well being they do not hinder learning ability. Medication is usually required for a minimum period of 1 month and must be combined with efforts to reduce stress to avoid recurrence of spraying once medication is stopped. Cats are weaned off treatment to reduce the chance of recurrence.

If all else fails and despite best efforts the cat continues to spray thus creating animosity within the household, then sadly, the fairest and most justified solution to all maybe euthanasia.

### **DO'S AND DON'TS IN MANAGING INDOOR SPRAYING**

- **Do** use 1Dsp of bicarbonate of soda in 1 litre of water to clean up puddles as this will neutralise the smell of cat urine. **Don't** use ammonia based products as this is too similar in odour to cat urine and will encourage continued marking.
- If your cat is suspected of spraying to gain attention **Do** ignore it during and after the event, as hard as this may be! and immediately shut the cat outside on its own. **Don't** rub your cats nose in the mess. If it sprays for attention then that is exactly what you are giving it, thus encouraging the behaviour. If it sprays due to anxiety such treatment is only likely to increase its stress levels and worsen the spraying. **Do** pay more attention to troublesome cats when not exhibiting spraying behaviour.
- **Do** encourage your neighbours to have their cats, particularly tom cats, neutered. This not only decreases territorial aggression and anxiety during breeding season, but also reduces unwanted kittens.
- **Don't** encourage neighbouring and stray cats onto your property by leaving food outside.