

Feline Marking Behavior

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Teaching your cat proper litter box behavior can be one of the biggest challenges a cat owner can have, and is a major reason why I get called to help.

The Importance of spaying/neutering

It appears that cats completely stop marking when they are spayed/neutered at a young age. It's much easier to control the behavior 'BEFORE' it starts. (Most cats who were neutered by 6 months of age don't appear to display this problem) It's more of a challenge with older cats that are spayed/neutered because they may have been practicing this behavior for a long time. The longer they practice the behavior the harder it is to eliminate it. But before we jump to behavioral issues, we must first rule out physical and medical issues.

Ruling out

Ruling out physical and medical issues are very important, and often when a cat is not using a litter box it is physical condition rather than behavioral; i.e., Urinary Tract Infection, Kidney Stones, or other kidney problems. It's a good idea to ask your veterinarian for a special litter so you can collect a urine sample for the vet to check. S/he can test for Urinary Tract Infections easily with the sample.

Sometimes infections can happen after spay/neuter surgery because the area becomes irritated. It's also a good idea to have your veterinarian run a blood panel to see if there are any abnormalities. If the veterinarian gives your cat a clean bill of health, what can we do next to treat the behavior?

Confine the cat in a small room/crate

There are many reasons cats mark. Mostly it's to mark territory, to let other cats to know who's there. Other reasons include: too many cats in the house, and anxiety. Even female cats can mark when they

are in a new environment, when there is a new cat added to the household, or when they are stressed.

That's why when people adopt a new cat, I always suggest confining the cat in a small room or even in a crate for the first few days, and then slowly introduce them to your house, room by room, with supervision. I know this can be extremely difficult, especially because people think it is cruel to keep cats in a crate. But one of the best things you can do for a new cat who is anxious, a former outdoor cat, or a former stray cat is to keep him in a big crate. He can have food, water, a bed, and a litter box to make them feel safe, and you can make sure s/he uses the litter box. Of course you can let him out, but only with supervision, and put him back in the crate when s/he is alone. Interact with him using his favorite toys when you introduce the cat to a new room rather than letting him roam by himself, and make the visit short and sweet. I would still keep any other resident cats isolated from the new cat. If you know for sure he is using the litter box, then you can give him a smaller space, such as bathroom and see if he is still litter box friendly.

Have you notice that cats like to be in a small box, and hide under the bed or in a corner when they are scared? People think cats like to roam freely, but in fact, they like to be in a small place until they are comfortable with their environment. They are curious creatures, but they are also very cautious. That's why it's better not to give her/him too much freedom and/or stimulation when you first bring them home. If your cat gets upset when he sees other cats (through windows and under doors), close the shade or/and curtain, and move furniture to block the area if you can. Give them time to get comfortable with each other from a distance before you introduce them.

How do we know if the cat is marking?

Most of the time when a cat marks, he will stand up tall, with his tail high up on the air; his tail or whole body twitches while spraying. Cats mostly mark on vertical surfaces, such as on walls, chair legs, or speakers, and usually spray much smaller amounts than when they urinate. Supervision and observation are keys to finding out where, when and why your cat marks.

It's crucial to thoroughly clean a marked area. Many pet stores sell black lights to detect cat urine (it glows under black light). Don't use any cleaner that contains ammonia as cat urine has ammonia and they will be more attracted to the area! Use an enzymatic cleanser such as Nature's Miracle. I also recommend scooping the litter at least once a day, and add an additional litter box in his room.

Also it is a good idea to use 'Feliway' (same as DAP for dogs, but this is for cats. You can get it at most major pet stores). It seems to work well for anxious/stressed cats.

Medication and alternative treatments

If none of the above works (or anything else you have tried), then it's a time to talk to your veterinarian again. Ask your veterinarian if there are any other options available (medication, alternative treatments). I have heard of a medication called 'Buspirone' that works for some cats with marking behavior. But

make sure your veterinarian is knowledgeable about 'Behavioral medication'. This is still a new area of vet care, and there are many vets who may not be familiar with it. If you go to a facility with multiple vets, ask the receptionists if any of their veterinarians are familiar with behavioral medication, or go to The Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society (<http://www.davms.org>) or The Veterinary Institute of Integrative Medicine (<http://www.viim.org/>) for more information.

Other option

Sometimes less conflict will be the only way to reduce the cat's anxiety and marking behavior. If you have multiple cats in the house, you may want to consider adoption for your anxious cat. Some cats simply thrive better if they are the only animal in the house, which may also stop the marking behavior.

PLEASE! Do not do the following if you find your cat marking:

Do not hit your cat, throw things at your cat, and don't rub your cat's nose in the accident area. Cats do not respond to these tactics well, and you may find that your cat will hide their marking behavior, or start to avoid you completely. There are more productive ways to help you and your cat.

Overall, please be patient!

Sometimes hormones take several months to dissipate, even after they are neutered. Finding out what causes your cat's behaviors will not only help you train your furry friend, but strengthen your relationship for years to come.

If you have any questions, please contact Yukari Bianchi at animalwellness@younianimalwellness.com, or call 303-332-1345, or visit my website, www.younianimalwellness.com