Territorial Marking Behavior in Cats

Cats are territorial animals, selecting areas of territory for survival. They let other people and animals know about their territory by marking it with a variety of methods and at many levels of intensity. For example, a cat may mark a valued object by rubbing it with her face. However some cats may go to the extreme of urinating or defecating to mark a particular area as their own. Urine-marking is not a house soiling problem, but rather a territorial behavior. Therefore, to resolve the problem, you need to address the underlying reason for your cat's need to mark his territory in this way.

Your cat may be urine-marking if:

- The problem is primarily urination. Cats rarely mark with feces.
- Your cat urinates on new objects in the environment (a shopping bag, a visitor's purse), on objects that have unfamiliar smells, or on objects that have another animal's scent.
- Your cat has conflicts with other animals in your home.
- There are several cats in a household but not enough territory.
- Your cat has contact with other animals outside your home. A cat that's allowed outdoors may come home and mark after having an encounter with another cat outside. If your cat sees another animal through a door or window, he may also feel a need to mark his territory.
- Your cat still uses the litter box for urination and defecation.

What You Can Do:

- Spay or neuter your pets as soon as possible. Spaying or neutering your cat may stop urine-marking altogether; however, if he has been urine-marking over a long period of time, a pattern may already be established.
- Resolve conflicts between animals in your home (see our handouts: "Feline Social behavior and Aggression Between Family Cats").
- Restrict your cat's access to doors and windows through which they can observe animals outside. If this isn't possible, discourage the presence of other animals near your house (see our handout: "Discouraging Roaming Cats").
- Keep your cat indoors. He'll be safer, live longer, and feel less need to mark his territory.
- Clean soiled areas thoroughly (see our handout: "Successful Cleaning to Remove Pet Odors and Stains").
- Make previously soiled areas inaccessible or unattractive (see our handout: "Aversives for Cats").
- If making soiled areas inaccessible or unattractive isn't possible, try to change the significance of those areas. Feed, treat, and play with your cat in the areas he is inclined to mark.
- Keep objects likely to cause marking out of reach. Guest's belongings, new purchases, and so forth should be placed in a closet or cabinet.
- If your cat is marking in response to a new resident in your home (a new baby, roommate, or spouse), have the new resident make friends with your cat by feeding, grooming, and playing with your cat. Also make sure good things happen to your cat when the new baby is around (see our handout: "Preparing Your Pet for Baby's Arrival").
- Increase the territory by adding vertical space, like cat towers. Also reduce any stress through play therapy and positive reinforcement training techniques, like clicker training (see our handouts: "Play With Your Cat" and "Cat Clicker Training").
- Practice "nothing in life is free" with your cat (see our handout: "Nothing In Life Is Free"). Have your cat perform at least one behavior (such as "sit") before you pet him, give him dinner, put on his

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leash, or throw a toy for him. "Nothing in life is free" will also help build confidence in your cat and reduce the need to mark his territory.

What NOT To Do:
Don't punish your cat. Punishment is ineffective because your cat won't understand why he is being punished.

Pets Aren't People
Cats don't urinate or defecate out of spite or jealousy. If your cat urinates on your new boyfriend's backpack, this is not his opinion of your taste in men. Instead, the presence of someone new has caused stress and your cat is communicating this stress through natural responses.

Assertion or Anxiety?
Urine-marking is usually associated with instability in relationships. While this is often the case, some cats may mark when they feel anxious or stressed. For example, a new baby in the home brings new sounds, smells, and people, as well as changes in routine. Your cat probably isn't getting as much attention as he was used to getting. All of these changes cause him to feel anxious, which may cause him to mark. Your cat may also become anxious by the presence of roaming neighborhood animals in your yard, or by the introduction of a new cat or dog into your household. If your cat is feeling anxious, you might consider talking to your veterinarian about medication to reduce his anxiety while you work on behavior modification.

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