



# Marking Behavior in Dogs and Cats

Dogs and cats are territorial animals and this means that they may claim a particular space, area, or object as their own. They let other people and animals know about their claim by marking it with a variety of methods and at many levels of intensity. For example, a dog may bark to drive away what he perceives as intruders to his territory or a cat may mark a valued object by rubbing it with her face.

Some pets 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 is a territorial behavior. Therefore, to resolve the problem, you need to address the underlying reason for your pet's need to mark territory in this way.

## House Soiling or Urine Marking?

### Your pet may be urine marking if:

- The problem is primarily urination. Dogs and cats rarely mark with feces.
- The amount of urine is small and is found primarily on vertical surfaces. Leg-lifting and spraying are versions of urine-marking, but even if your pet is leaving small puddles on the ground, he may still be urine-marking. Dogs and cats do sometimes mark on flat or horizontal surfaces.
- Any pet in your home is not spayed or neutered. Both intact males and females are more likely to urine mark than spayed or neutered animals. However, even spayed or neutered animals may mark in response to other intact animals in the home.
- Your pet 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 pet has conflicts with other animals in your home.
- Your pet 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 pet sees another animal through a door or window, he may feel a need to mark his territory.
- Your dog marks frequently on neighborhood walks and is marking inside the home as well.

## What You Can Do

- Spay or neuter your pet as soon as possible. Spaying or neutering your pet may stop urine marking altogether; however, if he has been urine marking over a long period of time, this may already be a habit that may be difficult to break.

- Resolve conflicts between animals in your home. You may need to hire a private trainer to help.
- Restrict your pet'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.
- Keep your cat indoors. He'll be safer, will live longer, and may not feel the need to mark his territory.
- Clean soiled areas thoroughly. Don't use strong-smelling cleaners as these may cause your pet to mark the spot even more in an attempt to cover the new smell.
- Make previously soiled areas inaccessible or unattractive. If making soiled areas inaccessible or unattractive isn't possible, try to change the significance of those areas. Feed, treat and play with your pet in the areas he is inclined to mark.
- Keep objects likely to cause marking out of reach. Guests' belongings, new purchases, and any other frequently marked items should be placed in a closet or cabinet.
- If your pet 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 pet by feeding, grooming, and playing with your pet if they are comfortable. Make sure good things happen to your pet when the new person is around.
- For dogs: watch your dog at all times when he is indoors for signs that he is thinking about urinating. When he begins to urinate, interrupt him (but don't scare him or punish him) and take him outside, then praise him and give him a treat if he urinates outside. When you're unable to watch him, confine your dog (in a crate or small room where he has never marked) or tether him to you with a long leash.
- For cats: try to monitor your cat's movements. If he even sniffs in an area he has previously marked, interrupt him and redirect his attention to play, food, or the litter box.

### **What NOT To Do**

Don't punish your pet for marking. The only way to completely stop them from marking is to get to the root of the problem. Punishment may result in:

- your dog or cat marking in hidden areas of the home where you won't find it until later
- your dog or cat becoming afraid to eliminate in front of you
- your dog or cat continuing to mark, but potentially avoiding you altogether

### **Pets Aren't People**

Dogs and cats don't urinate or defecate out of spite or jealousy. If your dog urinates on your baby's diaper bag, it's not because he is jealous of or dislikes your baby. The unfamiliar scents and sounds of a new baby in the house are simply causing him to reaffirm his claim on his territory. Likewise, if your cat urinates on your new boyfriend's backpack, this is not his opinion of your taste in men. Instead, he has perceived the

presence of an “intruder” and is letting the intruder know that this territory belongs to him. Most of the time if the marking is a new behavior because of new people or items, once the new people or items smell familiar, the marking will reduce significantly or stop completely.

### **Stress and Anxiety**

Some pets may mark when they feel anxious or upset. For example, a new baby in the home brings new sounds, smells, and people, as well as changes in routine. On top of this, your dog or 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 or house soil. Likewise, a pet that is generally anxious may become more so 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 pet is feeling anxious, you might consider talking to your veterinarian about medications to reduce his anxiety while you work on behavior modification.

### **Get Help**

If you can't figure out why your pet is marking or house soiling, or if you've tried everything with no positive results, please contact Homeward Pet Adoption Center's Animal Behavior Manager or another certified professional to help.