

Territorial Marking Behavior in Dogs and Cats



Dogs and cats are territorial animals. This means that they “stake out a claim” to a particular space, area or object. 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. A cat may mark a valued object by rubbing it with her face.

Some pets may go to the extreme of urinating or even 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 his territory in this way.

Signs of Urine-Marking

- 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. Dogs and cats do sometimes mark on horizontal surfaces. Leg-lifting and spraying are dominant versions of urine-marking, but even if your pet doesn’t assume these postures, he may still be urine-marking.
- Any pet in your home is not spayed or neutered. Both intact males and females are more likely to urine-mark than are 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. When there’s instability in the pack hierarchy, a dog may feel a need to establish his dominance by urine-marking his territory. If one cat is intimidating another cat, the bullied cat may express his anxiety by urine-marking.
- 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.

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, a pattern may already be established.
- Resolve conflicts between animals in your home (see our handouts: Canine Rivalry and Understanding Aggression Between Cats).
- 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 (see our handout: Discouraging Roaming Cats).
- Keep your cat indoors. He’ll be safer, will live longer, and will feel less need to mark his territory.
- Clean soiled areas thoroughly (see our handout: Cleaning to Remove Pet Odors and Stains). Don’t use strong smelling cleaners as these may cause your pet to “over-mark” the spot.
- Make previously soiled areas inaccessible or unattractive (see our handouts: Aversives for Dogs and 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 pet in the areas he is inclined to mark.
- Keep objects likely to cause marking out of reach. Guests’ belongings, new purchases and so forth, 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. Make sure good things happen to your pet when the new baby is around (see our handout: Preparing Your Pet for Baby's Arrival).
- 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 with a loud noise and take him outside, then praise him and give him a treat if he urinates outside. When you're unable to watch him, put your dog in confinement (a crate or small room where he has never marked) or tether him to you with a leash.
- For cats: try to monitor your cat's movements. If he even sniffs in an area he has previously marked, make a loud noise or squirt him with water. It's best if you can do this without him seeing you, because then he'll associate the unpleasantness with his intent to mark, rather than with you.
- Practice "nothing in life is free" with your dog (see our handout: Nothing In Life Is Free). This is a safe, non-confrontational way to establish your leadership and requires your dog to work for everything he wants from you. Have your dog obey at least one command (such as "sit") before you pet him, give him dinner, put on his leash or throw a toy for him. Establishing yourself as a strong leader can help stabilize the hierarchy and thus diminish your dog's need to mark his territory.

What NOT to Do

Don't punish your pet after the fact. Punishment administered even a minute after the event is ineffective because your pet won't understand why he is being punished.

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.

Dominance or Anxiety?

Urine-marking is usually associated with dominance behavior. While this is often the case, 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. 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. 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.

