



# Stanhope Park Veterinary Hospital

## FELINE BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

### URINE SPRAYING

Urine spraying is a form of territorial marking behaviour performed by adult cats, and it is thought that it facilitates communication between cats from a distance, to coordinate different cats' movements in a territory to enable "timesharing", and for the avoidance of aggressive encounters.

There is no evidence to suggest however, that a cat investigating the spray marks of another cat avoids or retreats from them. Information about the timing of when these marks were made may be present as the sniffing and "**Flehmen response**" (*open mouth "tasting" of scent*) can vary depending on the age of the urine deposit. Odours are highly important to a cat's survival, so much so that they have a second scent organ called the **vomeronasal** or **Jacobsen's Organ** to allow them to "taste" significant smells (*the Flehmen response*).

Urine spraying has also probably adapted to fulfil other functions in the domestic neutered pet cat, reflecting its emotional state. Cats spray during socially stressful situations, possibly to increase their self-assurance, or as a coping strategy for stress, or even as a form of displacement activity. Cats are often seen outside spraying urine against bushes, fences and other objects. It is normal behaviour for a cat to spray urine under these circumstances, however, if a cat starts to spray urine indoors, this indicates that it doesn't feel secure and that something is causing it to become stressed.

The classical presentation for urine spraying involves the cat backing up to a vertical surface, often after sniffing the area intensely and showing a Flehmen response. The cat stands with its tail erect and quivering and raises its hindquarters. The cat may or may not tread with its hind paws while squirting a small stream of urine (*less than 2ml*). Some urine marking can take place on horizontal surfaces (*usually items of clothing on the floor or other objects*), either in a squatting posture or by standing and spraying. The spray marks can be quite hard to find and you may just be aware of the smell. You may see a small trickle of sticky brown substance on a skirting board, radiator or door etc. Other favoured targets for urine spraying include electrical equipment, full-length curtains, plastic bags and clothing.

#### WHICH CATS SPRAY URINE?

Males and females are both capable of spraying urine, although the frequency is higher in males. Spraying is much more common in entire cats, suggesting it may be facilitated by sexual hormones to provide information about the sprayer's presence and reproductive status. Approximately 90% of entire males and 95% of entire females show a significant decrease in spraying after neutering.

In the neutered population, it is estimated that 10% males and 5% females engage in urine spraying, and the incidence of urine spraying in a household is directly related to the density of the cat population. The likelihood of urine spraying increases in proportion to the number of cats within the household, to as much as 86% with 7+ cats, and around 100% with 10+ cats.

If you have any questions about your pets call us on 01325 620968 or ask a member of our team



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## WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CAT IS SPRAYING URINE INDOORS

The first thing to do is arrange an appointment with your vet to examine the cat. If the cat is young and not yet neutered then the most likely cause would be that the cat is becoming sexually mature. Neutering at this time would likely prevent the spraying from recurring and would avoid roaming, fighting and unwanted pregnancies. Caution should be taken in presuming all urine spraying has a primary behavioural motivation as diseases causing localised pain or discomfort can result in a cat adopting a spraying posture to urinate. It is thought that around 30% of cats that present for spraying have an underlying medical problem such as **CYSTITIS**. If medical causes are ruled out then behavioural issues may be addressed.

## STRESS

Domestic cats are a self-reliant species, i.e. responsible for their own survival, and so don't readily show emotion as this would make them vulnerable to attack. Cats are therefore, excellent at hiding signs of illness, pain and stress. There are probably subtle signs there, but often stress can only be established by looking for changes in patterns of behaviour. Urine spraying would certainly indicate that your cat is stressed about something in its world.

Not all cats respond to the same pressures by spraying urine as it depends on the individual's temperament. Broadly speaking, cats can be stressed by other cats, humans or the environment within which they live. Examples of specific triggers include:

- **Conflict with other cats in the household**
- **Dense population of cats outside the home**
- **Invasion of your home by a strange cat** (*e.g. coming through an open window or cat flap*)
- **Decorating or building work** (*disruption of the cat's territory*)
- **New additions to the family** (*e.g. new baby, pet, lodger*)
- **Owner absence or change of work schedule**
- **Inappropriate punishment**
- **Excessive or intrusive contact from humans**

Urine spraying can come and go, depending on the presence or absence of whatever it is that is stressing your cat. Often the problem returns and the longer you wait before tackling the problem, the more complicated it can become. Urine spraying can be difficult to resolve as it is a normal behaviour for the species and sometimes the identified stress triggers can be outside your influence (*such as cats outside*).

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