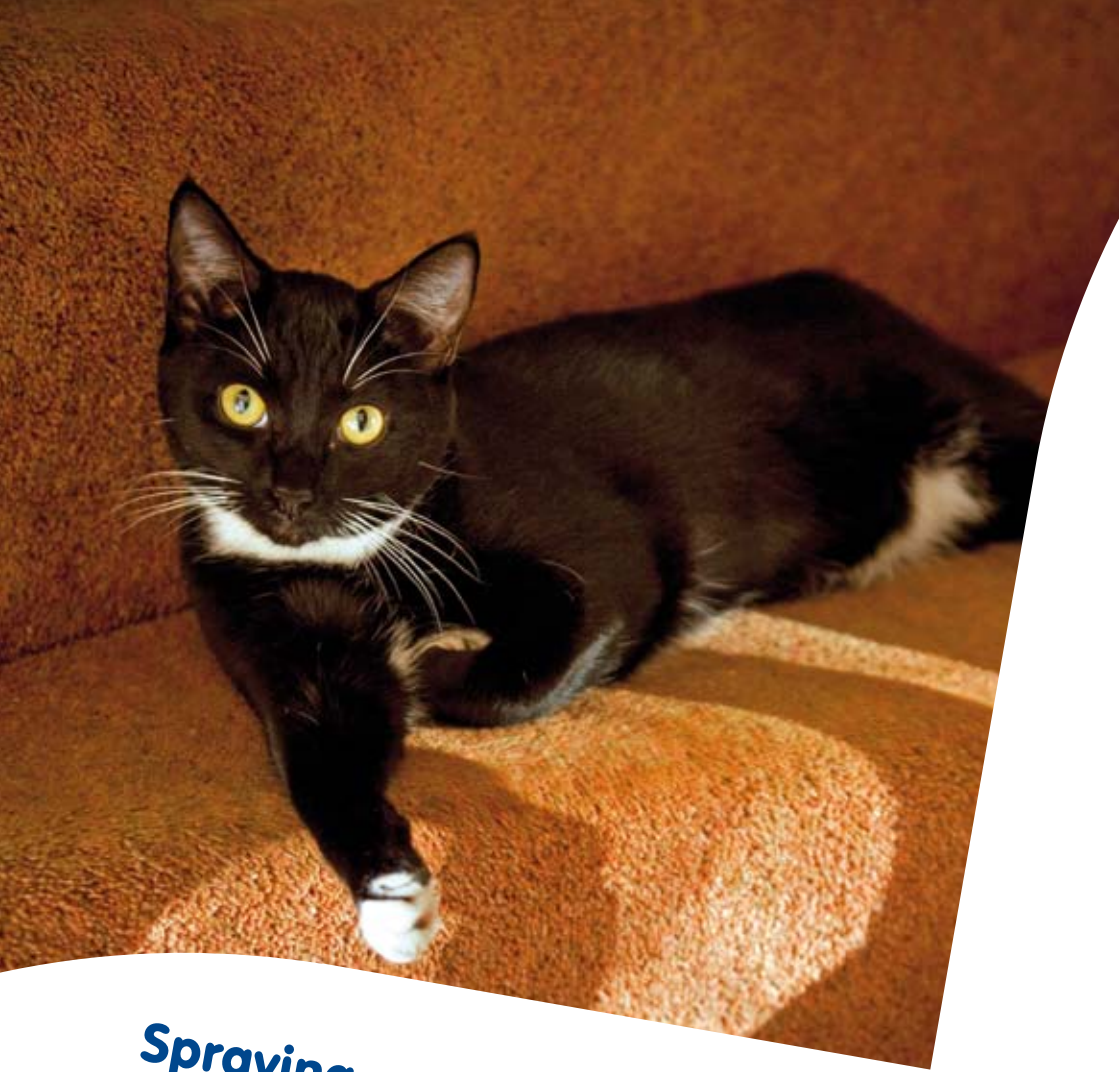


CAT 21

Spraying and soiling indoors



The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.



Spraying and soiling indoors

Cats are meticulous animals and usually confine their toilet behaviour to the litter tray or garden. The smell of cat urine in the house, or the discovery of faeces in the corner of the room, can be worrying.

Illness, being trapped in a room or a sudden fright may all cause a one-off accident. However, the reason for the inappropriate deposition of urine or faeces in the home should be determined for the health and welfare of the cat. Whatever the cause, punishment is not the answer. This will only make the cat more fearful and the problem worse.

Spraying or urinating?

Cats use urine as a scent signal or mark for themselves and other cats. The motivation for scent-marking is different to that of urinating to relieve a full bladder. Catching your cat in action, or a little detective work at the site, will help determine whether the cat is spraying or urinating.

To urinate, the cat squats and deposits a volume of urine on a horizontal surface. The carpet, duvet, sofa or bath are commonly chosen sites. To spray, however, the cat stands up, usually making a treading motion with the hindlegs, tail upright and quivering. A small volume of urine is sprayed backwards onto a vertical surface such as a wall, leaving an obvious scent mark. Cats commonly choose a spot close to the door or window, especially curtains, to spray. Some specialise in spraying electrical

equipment or novel items in the home such as shopping bags! Once you have ascertained which of the above your cat is doing, you can take action to resolve the behaviour.

Medical problems

A cat that has started to urinate inappropriately in the house should be taken to the vet for a check-up. Cystitis or other types of urinary tract disease may cause the cat to strain and to pass small amounts of urine frequently. The infection or irritation makes the cat urinate immediately, rather than attempting to go outside or to the litter tray. Urinating in this way can sometimes be confused with spraying.





Why does my cat soil indoors?

A cat may not wish to go outside to urinate or defecate for a number of reasons.

Old age

An older cat may not want to venture out in bad weather or may be having problems using the cat flap because of stiffening joints. Providing a litter tray may solve the problem.

Fear

There may be something threatening outside. Your cat may be afraid of a neighbourhood dog, another cat, or traffic after a close encounter with a car. Cats normally dig a hole, squat to urinate or defecate, and cover it up afterwards. A cat feels vulnerable during this process.

If the problem is caused by another cat outdoors, or even coming in through the cat flap, then take steps to make your cat feel secure again. Lock the cat flap and let the cat out yourself. This provides some security and helps frighten off any cats waiting in the garden.

Change to a more sophisticated cat flap – perhaps one with a magnetic or electronic key worn on the cat's collar so that intruders cannot violate your cat's safe refuge. It may be that your cat has to run the risk of going into other people's gardens to dig a hole because the soil in your own garden is not soft enough (thus encountering other cats and dogs). Dig up an area for your cat to use. Choose a quiet corner with some shelter. A pile of sand will be equally attractive, or provide a litter tray indoors.

Presence of strangers

Occasionally cats urinate or defecate indoors as a marking behaviour when owners go on holiday and leave a stranger to care for them. Because they feel vulnerable, they mark an area that has a strong scent of the owners such as the duvet. The best way to avoid this is to keep the bedroom door closed. Make your cat feel secure again on your return from holiday (see later).

Litter tray problems

If your cat normally uses a litter tray but has recently started to go elsewhere in the house there may be an obvious reason.

Dirty litter tray – Cats do not like using a tray if it is heavily soiled. Litter trays should be cleaned out every couple of days and the solids or clumps removed daily. If you have several cats, provide one tray for each.

Litter tray too clean – Using scented litter, deodorants or disinfectants with strong smells may put the scent-sensitive cat off using the tray. Use a feline-friendly disinfectant and make sure the tray is rinsed thoroughly with clean water. Avoid disinfectants which turn cloudy in water as these usually contain phenols which are toxic to cats. Rinse the litter tray before use. Cats learning to use the litter tray initially may need to associate it as a latrine area and over-frequent cleaning may weaken this association.

Wrong type of litter – Changing the consistency of the litter, or changing to a scented type, may put the cat off using it. Many cats prefer fine-grain litter with the consistency of sand. If you want to change the type of litter, mix the new one in gradually over a week or so to gauge the cat's reaction.

Position of the litter tray – If the tray is positioned in the open where the dog, children or other cats disturb it, the cat may feel too vulnerable to use it, and seek a more secure spot behind the sofa! Place the tray in a quiet spot where the cat only has to watch in one or two directions rather than in the open or in a thoroughfare. Placing food near the tray will put the cat off using it. Put the feeding bowl elsewhere.

Type of litter tray – If you use an open type of tray it may be worth purchasing one with a lid to provide security. An inverted box with a hole cut in it may suffice.

Bad associations – Occasionally a cat decides not to use their litter tray because of a previous bad experience. Perhaps it was cornered there to be given medication, or intimidated by another pet or child when last using it. Moving the tray to a quiet spot and providing a lid for it may help.

Breaking the habit – Whether a genuine accident or not, once the cat has urinated or defecated at a particular spot, the animal's sensitive nose encourages the cat to use that place again. The best way to break the habit is to keep the cat away from the area for as long as possible and remove any residual smell the cat could detect. Wash the area with a solution of biological or enzymatic washing liquid/powder and then use a plant-mister to spray it with surgical spirit. Scrub this off too and leave it to dry. You are advised to try a small area first on delicate fabrics. Placing some dried cat food in the area may help to prevent the cat using it again for this purpose.





Why does my cat spray indoors?

All cats, male or female, entire or neutered, spray. Usually this occurs outdoors as part of their scent communication system. They also leave scent signals by rubbing, scratching and bunting (running the glands around the mouth onto twigs or other objects). The cat leaves a scent to alert other cats, but also to furnish the area with a familiar smell, boosting self-confidence. In the unneutered cat, the urine signals both the cat's presence and also sexual status.

Females in season have high levels of oestrogen in their urine in order to attract toms. Toms leave a highly pungent spray, which is a combination of urine and secretions from the anal glands, under their tails.

Cats also mark their indoor territory by rubbing, scratching and bunting. Most pet cats are neutered and do not spray indoors, probably because they do not feel the need to. Spraying indoors is a sign that the cat is feeling stressed and is trying to feel more secure by surrounding themselves with their own scent.

As indoor spraying indicates that the cat feels threatened by something, any use of aggression by the owner telling the cat off only serves to make the problem worse. Owners must instead try to ascertain what the threat is and then take steps to alleviate it. Common causes

Retraining – Some cats need to be retrained to use a litter tray in the same way that kittens are trained by their mother not to soil their bed. Initially the mother removes the waste and, by a couple of weeks old, kittens learn to leave the nest to urinate and defecate. Placing the cat in a large pen with a bed and litter tray mimics this early learning. In a pen there is little option but to use the tray. In this way the cat should learn to associate toileting with the litter tray.

Let your cat out at a time when you can watch, and put the cat back on the tray if you see them heading for a soiling spot or behaving as if about to urinate or defecate. If an accident does happen, clean it up with tissue and place the soiled tissue in the tray so the cat learns to make the associations you want.

The cat may get the idea within a few days, however it may take a few weeks. When the cat has started using the tray properly, gradually reintroduce the animal to the rest of the house, one room at a time so that you can supervise and prevent accidents happening.

include new cats in the home or neighbourhood, a new baby or person, building works, redecoration or a change of routine.

Help your cat feel secure

Even when the cause of spraying is not obvious there are ways in which you can make your cat feel more secure. For example, limiting the area the cat is allowed to patrol to one or two rooms, may help improve feelings of security and reduce the desire to mark.

Decorating and building works

A nervous cat or one kept entirely indoors may be threatened by changes to the home environment. Smells brought in on feet may be enough to trigger a feeling of insecurity and the need to spray. Redecorating or replacing furniture effectively removes all your cat's subtle scent markings that have been carefully placed by rubbing and scratching. These will now be replaced by the strong smell of new carpets, paints or furniture. To reduce their impact, keep the cat away from the altered room until the smells are not quite so strong and have mingled with the other familiar scents in the house.

You can help speed this process by spreading some of your cat's own scent yourself. Take a soft cotton cloth and rub it gently around the cat's face (where some of the glands which produce the cat's

individual scents are located) to collect scent. Dab the furniture or walls of the room where the problem is occurring with the cloth and repeat this daily. A cat may be less likely to spray if aware that scent is there already. Vet's can also supply a product which acts in the same way. It contains facial pheromones – the scents produced by the glands on your cat's face.

Threats from neighbouring cats

If your cat has been unsettled by a strange cat entering the house, lock the cat flap and let your cat in and out yourself. Cats often spray around the cat flap or doors to make themselves more secure and to signal their presence to invading cats. Change the cat flap to a sophisticated one which is opened by a magnet or electronic key on your cat's collar. Chase other cats out of the garden to give your cat support outside. Once the cat feels that the indoor environment is safe there will be less need to mark it.



New resident cat

The addition of a new cat to the household can threaten resident cats, or upset the balance in a multi-cat household, and therefore induce spraying. To overcome this difficult problem you need to be able to prevent conflict, give the threatened cat(s) more security and link the presence of the cats together to something rewarding.

The problem with cats is that you need to find something that provides more reward than the feeling they get simply by hiding from the threat. Try feeding them together. If they like attention, provide it when they are sharing space in the same room and generally make it pleasant when they remain calm together.

This can be helped by supplying high perches for the cats. Shelves, wardrobes or cat activity centres provide perches that allow cats to share a room but still feel safe. Consider putting the spraying cat in the safety of a large pen or

carrier and allowing all your cats to share the room while they become acquainted – see the pet care leaflet, Introducing your cat to other pets (C23). Pheromone sprays may help to make the home more cat friendly.

When a cat is simply too stressed for the situation ever to be resolved, it is worth considering rehoming the threatened cat to a place with no other cats. Without the pressure of trying to cope with other cats, the likelihood of spraying is reduced.



Discouraging marking

Part of the clever process of passing on feline scent messages is that, as they degrade, the cat is encouraged back to top up the mark. Thus, to stop the spraying behaviour you need not only to reduce the threat, but also the motivation to re-mark the scented area too. This can be undertaken by removing all the scent of the urine as described earlier (see page 5, Breaking the habit). Placing a food bowl at the site may also discourage further spraying.

Specialist help

With some cats, the problem can be more persistent, so discuss this with your vet. If necessary, your case can be referred to a feline behavioural specialist.



Happy, healthy pets

Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

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Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

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