



Marking and How to Stop It

Cats have different ways and different reasons for leaving behind their unmistakable mark.

You return home and your cat rubs her head against your leg, your purse — even the bag of groceries you've placed on the floor. What owners often view as a greeting is a behavior, called marking, that helped Kitty's feral ancestors survive.

Understanding what marking is, how your cat marks and how to manage the behavior can help to foster a feline-

friendly home.

Why Do Cats Mark?

Cats are territorial, avoidance-based animals that prefer a solitary lifestyle. They claim an area using scent and visual "marks" that communicate physical, social and sexual status to other felines. The rubbing behavior described earlier is "a ritual between colony mem-

bers, and we believe this leads to a 'colony odor,'" according to Paul L. DeMars, DVM of Oklahoma State University, who is board certified by the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners.

A cat's vomeronasal or Jacobson's organ — which is located behind the incisor teeth in the roof of the mouth — detects the pheromones deposited by other felines during marking. When your kitty assumes a grimacing pose with her mouth slightly open — exhibiting what veterinarians call the Flehman response — she is likely investigating another cat's mark.

In the wild, the size of a cat's marked territory is determined mainly by food supply. If food is plentiful, felines happily share territory with others, but when supplies dwindle, dominant cats will force others out. Sexual state also dictates territory range. Tomcats seeking mates will ven-

ture ten times further than females and mark repeatedly to discourage other suitors.

The Ways That Cats Mark

Cats mark in four ways: by rubbing, and scratching and with urine and feces. But the different methods have different motivations, explains Dr. DeMars. "Facial pheromones are 'happy cat' pheromones, while urine pheromones are more stress-related."

Cats have enlarged, scent-releasing sebaceous glands around their mouths, on their chins, in their ear canals, on the neck and shoulders, near the anus and at the base of the tail. Grooming spreads your pet's signature scent over her entire body.

When your cat rubs against something, she scents her personal space, which helps her feel secure. Rubbing also mimics the comforting behavior mother cats use with their kittens. Your house (and you yourself) are covered with a potpourri of feline fragrances. Cats typically mark people with their foreheads and use their cheeks or chins for inanimate objects.

New items, people or pets alter Kitty's scent structure and compel her to mark the additions, sometimes excessively. Your feline may first rub a previously marked object for reassurance before wiping against the interloper. Severe environmental changes may cause anxiety and lead to marking with scratches, urine and feces (see information on next page). These feelings are exacerbated in blind cats, who must navigate their territories using memory and scent.

Marking with scratches stakes out territory and is found on commonly used doorways, sleeping quarters and boundaries that your cat thinks are threatened. Kitty uses her paws and



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claws to create a visual and olfactory communication mark, the latter via sweat glands in the skin of her paw pads. Scratching also communicates size, which is why cats often reach up and scratch downward.

Grooming scratching — which helps remove old skin and claw sheaths and to maintain muscle tone — differs from marking scratching because the latter repeatedly occurs in the same spot.

Urine Spraying/Marking

Both females and males spray and mark with urine, although the behaviors are more common in males and the scent more pungent in non-neutered toms. A fatty ingredient allows cat urine to cling to surfaces.

These behaviors are deliberate actions intended to send different messages. Cats twitch their tails and spray from a standing position onto a vertical surface, usually in a sheltered location (to prevent removal by rain) at another cat's nose level. The message is, "Keep out" or in the case of some males, "Look, here I am. Come back when you are in heat."

Urine marking from a squatting position most often stems from anxiety. Its purpose is to cover up an unfamiliar scent, claim a new item as territory and regain a sense of security. New animals, people or living arrangements and schedules can provoke urine marking. Conflict with a family member, bullying behavior by another pet, or even seeing strange animals from a window can be other causes.

Urine "marks" on floors or in rugs are unlikely to indicate true marking behavior. Your pet may have a lower urinary tract disease that causes her to have a sudden and unexpected urge to urinate, or makes her want to avoid the litter box (which she associates with painful urination). Take her to your veterinarian for a checkup.

Thankfully, fecal marking, also known as middening, is rare. Like

Prevention Tips

Marking via rubbing is welcomed by owners and cats alike. However, scratching Mom's favorite chair or soiling the new Chinese rug requires owner intervention. These ideas help manage kitty's inborn behavior.

- ◊ **Reevaluate the litter box:** "Litter box issues can fill a small novel," says Dr. DeMars. He recommends multiple bathrooms. "There should be more litter boxes than cats, even if you own a single cat." Place them in private areas away from food and sleeping quarters. Be fastidious about emptying deposits daily and completely clean it weekly. Choose an appropriate size and style: Some cats like closed boxes while others prefer open ones.
- ◊ **Buy a scratching post:** Initially place the post near a scratch-prone area like a chair or doorway and praise your feline when she uses it. Then gradually move it to a location you prefer. If Kitty loves catnip, rub it on the post.
- ◊ **Manage multiple pets:** Different scents scattered throughout the house can exacerbate marking as each pet tries to dominate. Less interaction with other animals will always lessen your pet's need to claim its territory. Dr. DeMars suggests easing the introduction of new household animals by "rubbing a cloth on the facial region of one cat, then another."
- ◊ **Create territory:** More space makes your pet feel more secure. Vertical cat stands or window extensions and protected enclosures expand feline real estate.
- ◊ **Limit Kitty's access:** Outdoor cats and former strays are more likely to mark with urine and feces since they frequently encounter unfamiliar scents and may tend toward feral feline behavior. Keep your pet indoors and discourage other animals from entering your property; your cat might sense an outsider's presence.
- ◊ **Change carefully:** If you acquire new pets, family members or objects, spend extra time with Kitty to assuage her anxiety. Introduce new litter brands gradually by mixing the new brand with the familiar one.
- ◊ **Keep strange items out of reach:** When houseguests arrive, restrict your pet's access to their living area. Suitcases and guestrooms are prime targets for urine marking.
- ◊ **Clean up:** Residual odor from a previous mark can trigger a recurrence when your cat passes the area. Use an odor neutralizer or a chemical enzyme and avoid products containing ammonia.
- ◊ **Leave your own marks:** Turn a mark-prone area into a feline playground or dining area. This changes the area's significance and makes your pet less likely to re-mark.
- ◊ **Strike before Kitty does:** If you observe your cat sniffing a previously marked area, a quick squirt of water will discourage her from depositing a new mark. Administer this corrective immediately, and from far enough away that she doesn't associate it with you.
- ◊ **Neuter your pet:** Spaying or neutering will not guarantee a mark-free life, but it will lessen your chances of encountering a soiled bedspread. Socialization with unneutered cats may trigger this behavior, so make sure every non-human family member is included. Neutering before six months of age reduces the likelihood that bad habits will develop.
- ◊ **Tough cases:** Make sure to check with your veterinarian as soon as a problem develops. Inappropriate behaviors are harder to correct if allowed to persist. Difficult cases may require the advice of an animal behaviorist.

thing is wrong and the location of the mark is the first communication as to the cause.

Feces left next to a litter box may

tract or it could mean, "My bathroom environment is unpleasant." Other changes in the scent structure, such as an overnight house guest, can also