

Why Do Cats Spray?

Find out why cats spray.

Inquiring minds want to know. Whose territory is this? How long ago was he here? Is she ready to mate? How old is he? Like a distant early warning system, a cat's urine spray contains pheromones—chemical substances that stimulate behavioral responses—that inform other felines of the cat's age, sex, sexual receptivity, and how long ago he passed by. This allows a passing cat to determine whether a rival is in the area and whether to continue on his way or take another route. You might call it a sort of time-sharing arrangement. When the scent from the first cat fades, it's safe for another cat to pass through.

Scent marking also acts as a sign of ownership or as an invitation. When your cat sidles up to a vertical object such as a tree or light pole—or your new sofa—backs up, positions his quivering tail, and emits a pungent spray of urine, he is sending a clear message to intruders: this is mine! Unlike a dog, a cat who comes across the scent mark of another cat will not spray over it. Instead, he makes his mark in a nearby area. On the other hand, female cats in heat spray to indicate their availability. Their urine contains hormones, the scent of which attracts male cats from miles around.

Indoor cats can be just as territorial as their outdoor brethren. It's not uncommon for indoor cats to mark their territory by spraying, especially if there are too many cats in the home or if a new cat is brought into the household. Cats may also claim ownership of their people by marking areas that smell like their owners.

Unneutered males start spraying at sexual maturity, usually six to eight months of age. To nip spraying in the bud, neuter male cats before six months of age. A neutered cat can still spray if the urge is strong enough, but the odor of his urine is not as powerful. Female cats who are spayed have no need to spray, but they may still go through the motions.

If your cat starts spraying in the house, examine your lifestyle for changes. Cats are creatures of habit, and change can cause them to feel the need to state their presence. You can try to prevent spraying by placing aluminum foil or plastic over the area sprayed so that the urine makes a noise or splashes back on the cat; by neutralizing the odor and then feeding the cat in that area (cats don't like to soil their dining rooms); or simply by keeping the cat away from the area. Zap your cat with a water squirter when you see him begin to move into position.