

Cats Communicate by Scent

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains why a change in scent can cause problems between cat companions.

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Q: We have two cats, and they get baths every few months, usually at the same time. But recently one of the cats needed an emergency bath, and we used a new shampoo on her. Now the other cat doesn't want anything to do with her and actually hisses at her. What can we do?

A: A cat's nose is a vital communication tool. Cats use scent to communicate with other animals and it's used for identifying friends and strangers. Sometimes, after a visit to the veterinarian or a bath a cat smells strange and might not be recognized by her cat buddies at home.

There are a number of ways to restore harmony on your home front. Petting your angry cat with a towel and then petting your newly washed cat with the same towel will transfer the disgruntled cat's smell on to the squeaky clean cat. Now the clean cat smells like the disgruntled cat and is recognized. A friend of mine, Darlene Arden, an animal behaviorist, uses a different approach. She puts a dab of cooking vanilla on the base of each of the cat's tails. If your cats both enjoy baths, then re-shampooing both cats with the same brand of shampoo is an option. Most cats are not big fans of baths and bathing them against their wishes often results in unhappy and traumatized cats. Whatever method you use, the desired result is for each of the cats to smell pleasantly the same.