

Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



Urine in your toaster? What to do when urine spraying strikes!

Vicky Halls investigates...

Probably one of the most complex and intractable problems I face as a cat behaviour counsellor is urine spraying.

If you have never witnessed a cat spraying urine, the classical presentation involves backing up to a vertical surface, often after sniffing the area intensely and showing a flehmen* response with a gaping mouth and faraway expression. The cat stands with its tail erect and quivering and raises its hindquarters. It may or may not tread with its hind paws while squirting a stream of urine, usually small amounts.

Urine spraying is a form of marking behaviour that enables cats to communicate with others from a distance. All cats are capable of urine spraying but the frequency is greater in males. The incidence is much higher in intact cats, suggesting it may be linked with the sexual hormones, providing information about the sprayer's presence and reproductive status. Ninety per cent of males and 95 per cent of intact females show a significant decrease in spraying after neutering.

Within the neutered population it is estimated that 10 per cent of males and five per cent of females engage in urine spraying. Studies have shown that the incidence of urine spraying in a household is directly related to the density of the cat population, with the likelihood of urine spraying increasing in proportion to the number of cats present.

Why do they spray?

There is still some debate about the purpose of urine spraying, other than for signalling reproductive status, but many sources suggest that it facilitates communication between cats from a

distance, to coordinate movement in a territory to enable 'timesharing' and avoid direct encounters.

Although the behaviour is still poorly understood, it is likely that urine spraying has adapted to fulfil other functions for the neutered pet cat, reflecting the emotional state of the individual. Cats tend to spray during socially stressful situations, possibly to increase their self-assurance, or as a coping mechanism for stress.

Caution should be taken, however, in assuming that all urine spraying is purely behavioural, as diseases causing localised pain or discomfort may result in a cat adopting a spraying posture to urinate. One study showed that 30 per cent of the spraying cats involved in the research actually had concurrent urinary tract disease.

Urine spraying is normal behaviour for the cat, occurring in areas where there is a sense of conflict or evidence of cats from outside the sprayer's own social group. On that basis, in a safe 'core area' such as the cat's home, urine spraying should not be necessary. However if the cat's perception of its home changes, and a sense of danger or conflict becomes evident, then this behaviour may be utilised to cope with the situation. The location of the spray marks is significant to the sprayer, with the first location that was ever targeted being a strong indicator of the primary source of the stress, for example if the spray marks occur around external doors and windows then the stressor is outside the house. Targets can be many and varied but popular locations include radiators, electrical equipment, skirting boards, full-length curtains, bags from outside, doors and staircases and the owner's clothing.

Many owners report that their cats start spraying at the onset of social maturity, any time between 18 months and four years of age. Specific triggers include:

- Inter-cat conflict within a household
- Invasion of the home by a strange cat
- Indirect threat from strange cats (eg scent on clothing)
- Presence of a cat flap in a high cat population area
- Environmental upheaval
- Owner absence/change of work schedule

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the International Cat Care's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For more information about these books or if you have any concerns about your own cat's behaviour please visit her website: www.vickyhalls.net



What to do

If you are experiencing urine spraying in the home then the best advice is to consult with your veterinary surgeon, to rule out illness, and request a referral to a qualified cat behaviour counsellor or similar professional.** The behaviourist will then conduct a thorough investigation including history taking, observation of the cats and assessment of the home.

If you have a good idea of where the stress is coming from (with an intruder cat this may be obvious) then there are certain steps that you can take before any referral takes place.

If the problem comes from **outside** the house then consider the following:

- Block the lower panels of any glass windows or doors with opaque film*** to help your cat feel more secure indoors with the extra camouflage that the obscured glass provides
- If the outside cat is sitting on top of a fence or shed to intimidate your cat from a high vantage point, consider preventing this by using rubber intruder strips (Prikka® strips) on top of fences or fixing upright panels on shed roofs to act as a solid barrier
- Your cat may benefit from a high vantage point in the house to view the dangerous outdoors, so a tall cat scratching centre could give your cat more confidence when checking out the enemy
- If your cat is targeting full-length curtains with the urine spraying then consider pinning them up or removing them temporarily until help is sought
- Some cats may use an alternative strategy to urine spraying, given the opportunity, so ensure there are plenty of rigid scratching posts throughout the house, as scratching is also a form of territorial marking
- The use of some deterrents externally, for example Silent Roar (pellets soaked in the essence of lion dung) or motion sensor water sprinklers may deter the outside cat from coming into your garden. Even your own cat's faeces from the litter tray could be placed strategically at boundary fences or on pathways; anecdotally this has also been found to be effective in some cases

If the problem comes from conflict **inside** the home then you can consider the following:

- Ensure there are sufficient resources for the number of cats in the home. These resources include feeding areas, water stations, beds, high vantage points, litter trays, private places and scratching posts. The popular formula suggests one resource per cat plus one extra (in a four cat household the total number of each resource would be five), located in different areas of the home. If you can identify areas where each cat spends most of its time then these areas should contain the essentials. If you are positive that any of your cats represent bonded

pairs or threesomes (defined as a social group) then you can revise the formula to one resource per 'social group' plus one extra

- If you have identified just a couple of specific sites for spraying then, to prevent damage, you can prop empty litter trays (lined with an absorbent material) against these sites to provide a controlled environment for spraying
- Synthetic feline facial pheromones (Feliway) can also be used according to the manufacturer's instructions, either in the diffuser form, plugged into an electric socket, or spray form applied directly onto the cleaned urine-marked site
- Placing food bowls near regularly sprayed sites can change the perception of the area from 'dangerous' to 'safe' so it's worth a try but this doesn't always have the desired effect

Urine spraying is difficult to resolve as it is a normal behaviour and many of the identified stress triggers may be outside the influence of the owner, so help from a behaviourist sooner rather than later is often the best option. ●

**Flehmen response = a gaping mouth with curled lip that enables the cat to draw the smell through its second organ of scent in the roof of its mouth called the vomeronasal organ.*

*** You can find a behaviourist via the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (www.apbc.org.uk)*

***Opaque film = This attaches to the window without any adhesive and can be purchased from any good DIY store.*

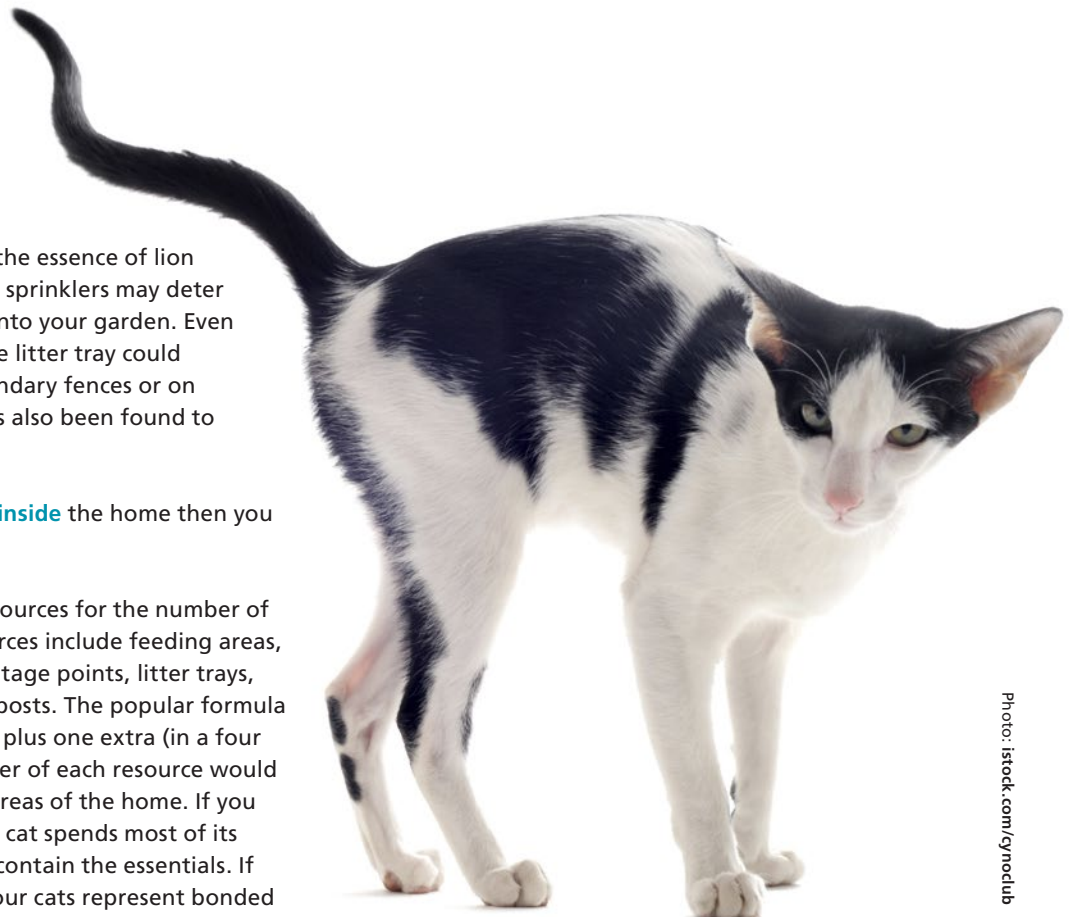


Photo: iStock.com/gynodub