

Dog Tip: Marking - Understanding It, Stopping It

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1. Overview

Dogs gather essential social information using their sense of smell, whether smelling other dogs directly or sniffing their urine and feces. That's why dogs urinate much more than required to simply empty their bladder.

Marking serves as a way to claim territory, advertise mating availability and to support the social order. Dogs like hierarchy; it's what they understand. They communicate age, gender and status within their packs via the pheromones in urine. Both male and female animals can engage in marking behavior.

A dog uses urine marking to help make a new environment smell like home, masking the unfamiliar odors with his own scent. Humans also engage in marking behavior, though it usually takes such forms as moving in a favorite chair and hanging pictures on the wall.

In addition, marking functions as an efficient way to protect a dog's perceived space than physically challenging each interloper who approaches that space.

Animals also mark to advertise their sexual availability, which is one reason why it helps to neuter and spay dogs. The earlier, the better, since early neutering can keep young dogs from ever developing the impulse to mark.

Urinating in the house and other inappropriate areas can also be a sign of urinary tract disease, so take your dog to the vet before ruling out this possibility.

Urinating in the house can also stem from lack of housetraining or lack of an appropriate place to urinate, or having to hold it longer than the dog can physically wait. Consider having someone visit your dog for a mid-day walk if you work long hours.

2. Canine Territorial Marking

By Myrna Milani, BS, DVM. Originally written for DogWatch, a newsletter for the general public from the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

Q. My dog urinates in numerous locations in my house, which I've been told is territorial marking. The only place she's never gone is in my bed. On the other hand, my cousin's dog only urinates in his bed and he was told that's territorial marking, too. How can these two

opposite behaviors mean the same thing?

A. To understand the variations that may occur in marking behavior, we first need to understand territorial behavior itself. Recall that establishing and protecting the territory serves as the primary animal priority. The wild dog pack's territorial nature leads its members to claim an area large enough to support them and any offspring, but not one so large that it requires excessive energy to adequately defend it. Within that space, the animals also protect certain prime locations - such as choice feeding sites and dens - more diligently than areas at the periphery.

However, because the ultimate goal remains to find food and water and reproduce, it makes sense to leave a token marker - such as scent-laden urine that communicates the resident's willingness to protect this space if necessary - rather than actually physically challenging every suspicious interloper who approaches that space. Moreover, because marking itself requires energy, it also makes sense only to mark as much as is necessary to get the job done.

Because animals communicate their sex and status in the pheromones in their urine, that typically means that the most vigorous animals in the pack do most of the marking because they pose the most threat to any interloper. (Imagine seeing a warning posted by the local police versus one posted by the third grade garden club: Which one would you take more seriously?) Thus, marking serves as a marvelously efficient way to avoid confrontations.

While a certain energy-efficient elegance underlies territorial theory when applied to a pack of wild animals, an individual pet's personality, the quality of its environment, and its relationship with its owner may throw numerous curves into the process. Pet dogs living in complex human environments may find themselves trying to reach some sort of a workable compromise between the ancient drive to establish and protect a territory, and their own temperaments and any physical or other limitations that would make doing this a threatening endeavor.

Under these circumstances, pets typically mark either that space they feel comfortable protecting or that which carries such a positive charge they'd risk injury or even death to protect it. In general, the less confident the dog and the more complex the environment, the more likely marking will occur, the more frequently it will occur, and the more it will involve intimate objects.

For example, Josie, a well-trained, stable dog who lives on a quiet, dead-end street feels no need to make any territorial statements beyond the messages communicated in her daily eliminations. Sandy, who lacks Josie's confidence plus lives in a busy suburb, lifts his leg on prominent fence posts and trees around the perimeter of his owner's yard in an effort to scare off invaders. More timid Bumpus marks by the front and back doors, his way of saying he only claims (and thus only feels obligated to protect) what's inside the house. Tuffy marks the upstairs hallway, effectively announcing his desire to protect all of his beloved owners' sleeping quarters. Little Sugar only marks her owner's belongings, and all of these except the bed. Her litter mate, Spice, only marks her owner's bed.

Additionally some pets will mark any new objects added to their territories, thereby claiming them and thus ruling out the need for a confrontation. Again, more confident animals may pee on the tires of the visitor's vehicle, whereas those who feel more vulnerable may pee on the visitor's belongings, or even the visitor himself.

In the majority of these cases, though, the marking exists because, due to a lack of training and other human displays that communicate leadership, owners have deliberately or unwittingly thrust this protective role upon their pets. Unfortunately, owners who don't understand what the animal communicates via the display - i.e., its fear and willingness to fight to protect this sacred space - often view the pet as spiteful, mean, or stupid for ruining their belongings. While attributing such negative emotions to perfectly logical canine behaviors always ranks as a tragedy, it's particularly sad in the case of very young, timid, or geriatric animals who believe they must protect their owners from the meter reader, school bus, and letter carrier day after day and endure the owner's wrath, too. (The dog does not understand it, and the owner's anger adds to the dog's confusion.)

On the other hand, once caring owners understand what causes the behavior, they can relieve their pets of the territorial stresses that cause the problem.

3. Canine Marking versus Peeing: A Medical or a Behavioral Problem?

By Myrna Milani, BS, DVM. Originally written for DogWatch, a newsletter for the general public from the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

Q. I travel a lot in my work and after I returned from a two-week trip, I discovered that my 6-year-old, spayed Chihuahua mix, Chili, has been peeing on the corner of my bed. Some people tell me it's a medical problem while others say it's behavioral. She's a little baby as well as my best friend and I want to do what's best for her, but I'm confused.

A. Approaching any problem that involves inappropriate urination as if it possesses both medical and behavioral components yields better results than taking an either/or approach. And both medical and behavioral components may elicit or result from bond issues which deserve attention, too.

To understand why this might be, let's first view Chili's problem as strictly medical. In that case, conditions such as a hormone deficiency, urinary tract infection, or some problem that causes her to drink more (such as diabetes) may cause her to accidentally urinate on her owner's bed, and a medical work-up will pinpoint the cause.

However, any medical problem that results in inappropriate elimination automatically sets her up for behavioral problems on two fronts. First, once Chili soils the bed, the scent of the urine may cause her to continue urinating there after any physical problem is resolved. Second, if her physical ailment makes her feel vulnerable and less able to protect her territory, she may begin marking her owner's bed to communicate this sentiment, too.

On the other hand, suppose Chili begins marking the bed because something threatens her during her owner's absence. Perhaps the pet-sitter her owner hired brings his own dog along, or maybe a noisy construction project begins in the apartment downstairs. In this case, the urine on the bed communicates, "Go away! I'll fight to protect this!" to whatever sound, scent, and/or sight frightens the little dog. While such a message would seem to signal great courage, in reality animals who mark within their owners' home communicate exactly the opposite: They really don't want to fight at all and hope any intruder will catch a whiff of that message and run. Because the pet-sitter's dog and the construction crew do, in fact, go away every day, as far as Chili's concerned, the marking works and she continues doing it.

How could this behavior set Chili up for medical problems? Well, we know that frightened dogs may mark their territories numerous times daily. We also know that dogs who feel insecure in their space may only eat and drink the minimum amount. We also know that stress elevates blood cortisol, a hormone from the adrenal glands, which can undermine the immune response. And, finally, we know that dogs caught up in protecting their space may not take time to groom themselves properly after eliminating. Putting these altogether, we can see how a stressed dog with a depressed immune response who repeatedly squats and eventually strains to urinate who also lacks the time to practice proper post-elimination hygiene could wind up with a urinary tract infection which would cause her to eliminate as well as mark in inappropriate places.

Additionally, the relationship between owner and dog often leads the animal to attach a strong emotional charge to the owners' bed. Practically all bed-marking occurs in dog-centered human-canine packs in which the dog feels obligated to protect the territory. Depending on the dog's personality, the bed may serve as the first or last target.

Further complicating the bond effects, regardless when and why the mess on the bed appears, owners who discover dog-doo in their beds rarely react neutrally, let alone positively, to it. However, dogs who eliminate on the bed in no way communicate that they are spiteful, mean, or stupid; they communicate that they have a medical, behavioral, and bond problem that requires an immediate, knowledgeable, and caring response. Yelling at the dog or punishing it will simply make the problem worse.

Instead, take your pet for a long walk to calm down and consider all the different reasons that could lead to this behavior. That mess on the bed could turn out to be a goldmine of information about your pet's health and behavior, and your relationship.

4. ON THE MARK! GET SET! NEUTER! Marking Elimination Program

The following marking elimination guidance is adapted from the GreatPets.com article by Sarah Wilson.

Even if a pup or dog is well bonded to the owner, he might not see the owner as the leader of the pack. A young dog having a bold, assertive temperament might be more prone to marking behavior. Sarah Wilson suggests the following steps for establishing leadership and eliminating marking behavior for such dogs. This program puts the person in the leadership role in a positive, nonconfrontational way.

Sleeps in his crate.

Where a dog sleeps is of much status-related import. Sleeping ON your bed makes him your equal. Also, being on a physically elevated level can fuel a dog's perception that he is top dog, even over the people of the house. So keep the dog off your bed and other people furniture. If the pup is assertive, have him sleep in his crate in the kitchen during the behavior modification program.

Works for a living.

Most dogs were originally bred to perform certain jobs, and this remains in their nature from generations of breeding. Generally, either you give them work or they make up their own. A young dog might make up a game called "Taking over the house one wet spot at a time". Have the dog sit

or down for EVERYTHING - every door opening, every pat, every word.

Avoid spanking and other punishment.

Dogs typically do not make the connection that the owner is hitting them because they marked. It is better and more effective to educate instead of punish. Wilson notes that spanking a dog for marking only makes him think you did NOT get the point last time, so he marks AGAIN and more clearly. He may defecate as well. "There" he says to himself "Surely, they will get THAT message!" Instead of punishing, you must take steps to change the relationship and establish that you are leader.

Supervision.

One wet spot and it is house arrest for four to six weeks. That means in sight, on lead or crated (or otherwise confined to a safe, puppy-proofed area). No exceptions.

Neuter!

Leg lifting and marking can be resistant to change, though, when marking at a young age, or when new to your home, the dog may just be trying out his wings or testing the boundaries. In any case, Sarah Wilson calls neutering one of the absolute first steps to controlling marking as well as other problems. Done early, neutering can help you avoid such problems altogether.

Trainer Cinimon Clark adds that neutering alone will probably not eliminate territorial marking if this is a learned behavior. This is why neutering before a dog reaches maturity or comes into heat (typically by age six months) is such a good idea. Neutered early enough, the dog will not learn marking behavior.

Adds vet Chris Cook, a neutered or spayed dog is a happier, healthier, more behaviorally balanced dog. After neutering, it takes a few weeks for the affected hormones to stop circulating.

In dogs neutered at a mature age, the marking may have become a learned, habitual behavior and will need behavior modification. Also, if you have an intact (unspayed) female in the house, this may add to the difficulties of breaking the habit.

In his article "To Pee or Not to Pee", Dr. Ian Dunbar explains that female dogs urine mark, some even raising a leg when doing so. When in heat, the female uses marking to broadcast her reproductive state to prospective suitors. For reproductively intact female and male dogs, urine communicates, attracts and arouses. Thus, another good reason to spay and neuter.

Another tip: some canine behavior specialists recommend that, particularly if the dog displays dominance and/or has aggression issues with other dogs, to discourage the dog from marking objects (fences, gates, signposts, bushes, etc.) when walking. Of course, allow the dog to relieve himself or herself. But if the dog is marking to claim an increasingly larger territory, try to discourage this behavior.

5. Odor elimination

It is extremely important to get rid of the odor the dog has left with previous markings. Use a specially formulated urine odor eliminator in all areas that have been marked. Remember that urine soaks through carpet to the padding, so try to clean the padding too...or replace as necessary. Do

not use ammonia or other standard household cleaners, since some will leave odors that many pets will feel compelled to mark upon. In addition to Simple Solution available in stores, you'll find new, specialized pet odor elimination products at:

http://www.paw-rescue.org/PAW/PETTIPS/DogTip_Cleaning.php
www.odordestroyer.com
www.planeturine.com
www.dogurine.com
www.dog-urine.com
www.justrite.com
www.rx4carpets.com/dog_urine.html
www.iloveproklean.com/dogurine.html
www.sea-yu.com (Petrotech odor eliminator)

6. Related resources

Dog Tipsheets on housetraining, house manners, leadership, dominance and other behavior issues
Click on [Housetraining](#).

More articles by Dr. Myrna Milani
<http://www.mmilani.com>

To Pee or Not to Pee by Ian Dunbar, PhD, MRCVS
<http://www.petcompanion.com/dogs/Pee.html>

Good Owners, Great Pets articles and books by Sarah Wilson
<http://www.greatpets.com>

Pet odor cleaning tips
<http://www.petodorremovaltips.com>

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For more Dog Tips and other information about pet care, adoption and the work PAW does, visit our website at: www.paw-rescue.org

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