

Walker Veterinary Hospital

Melanie S. Walker, D.V.M.

38111 US 290

Waller, TX 77484

Telephone (936)931-2244

www.walkervethospital.com



URINE MARKING IN DOGS

What does it mean if my dog is urinating on upright objects?

Dogs mark by urinating on upright objects. Leaving a scent mark with urine is a normal dog communicative behavior. Marking is most likely to occur on or near new or novel odors, especially the urine, left by other dogs. The volume of urine is usually small. The problem is much more common in intact males, but many neutered males and spayed females also mark their territory. If your dog marks where other dogs have urinated, when exposed to new odors, or when entering a strange environment, this may be a form of territorial marking. This may be more likely to occur if you visit or move into a new home or if you redecorate or get new furniture. Supervising introductions until your dog gets used to the new smells may be all that is required in these cases. Dogs that begin to mark in their home environment may be responding to stress or anxiety. Hormonal influences and sexual arousal, especially in intact male dogs may also lead to an increase in marking.



How can marking be treated?

Neutering will reduce male marking behavior in over 80% of male dogs but will only eliminate it in about 40% of dogs. It is also recommended for female dogs that mark during estrus. Remember that virtually any vertical object that your dog might sniff and investigate could be a target for marking. Therefore while the urine and sexual odors of dogs and other animals might be the strongest stimuli for marking, your dog might be attracted to any new or novel odor that it detects along the way.

How do I reduce outdoor marking?

It is likely impractical to expect to control and limit all marking and elimination behavior when your dog is taken for walks outdoors. When taking your dog for a walk, you will need to work on training your dog to walk on a relaxed leash by your side and to sit each time you come to a stop. See our handout on settle and going for a controlled walk. With a leash, or leash and head halter, it should be possible to keep your dog on task. The leash and head halter controls the muzzle and nose so that the head can be immediately turned away from the stimulus (potential target of marking) as it begins to show pre-marking behavior such as exploring, sniffing, turning into position, beginning to lift leg). Learn to predict and pre-empt. Once you reach the area where it is permissible for your dog to eliminate you can allow your dog to explore and sniff, and positively reinforce marking behavior.

How do I reduce marking when my pet is “visiting”?

Dogs that mark when visiting (e.g. the homes of friends or relatives, dog shows, veterinary clinics, obedience classes, etc.) should be kept on leash, at least until they are comfortable, settled and have had the opportunity for supervised exploration of the new environment. Where practical, it might be advisable to leave these dogs at home, rather than take them to places that have odors that are just waiting to be anointed with a urine mark. If you do take your dog along, make sure to keep your dog occupied with a task that is unlikely to lead to urine marking. Having your dog sit by your side, stay on a down command, play with a toy, or get affection and social contact from you or the people you are visiting gives the dog something constructive and acceptable to do. If your dog begins to get excited, anxious or begins to wander away to sniff and explore, this may be a prelude to marking and should be prevented or supervised with a leash (or leash and head halter) so that you immediately any pre-marking signs.

How do I control urine marking in my home?

If your dog marks in your home, you will need to determine the cause of the marking to determine if it is a temporary or isolated event (such as the visit of another dog or bringing a new plant into the home) or whether there might be underlying anxiety for which you need to find and resolve the cause. When bringing new upright objects or furniture into the home or moving into a new home, supervise your dog, on leash if necessary as it explores the new objects or new home, until you begin to allow some freedom. A DAP™ diffuser may also be useful.

Treatment for specific anxieties will vary with the cause. Insure that all training is reward based and that your dog has a regular and stimulating routine of exercise and play. At times when you are not playing, training, exercising or supervising, your dog should learn to settle down (preferably in its bed or confinement area) either to take a nap or play with its own toys. If the problem is related to fear or anxiety toward another dog in the home, then separation, gradual supervised reintroduction and a program of desensitization and counter conditioning may need to be implemented. If the pet is marking due to anxiety about noises or being separated from the owner then these problems will need to be addressed (see our handouts on noise phobias and separation anxiety).

When you are available to supervise, you should be playing, training or exercising your dog, or insuring that it is sufficiently occupied and relaxed that there is no attempt or desire to mark. Should your pet begin to wander away or head toward objects that have been previously marked, you can prevent problems by interrupting your dog with a verbal command or leash, and giving him an activity to keep him occupied. By keeping a leash (with or without a head halter) on your dog (as discussed above) you will be able to prevent your dog from wandering off and marking and can inhibit your dog should pre-marking signs being. When you cannot supervise confine your dog to an area where marking is unlikely to occur (his bedroom, eating room or crate) or place him in an area such as an outdoor run where marking would be acceptable. If you know the specific stimuli for marking then you might be able to keep your dog away from the windows, doors, plants or furniture where he might mark by confining him away from the area or using booby traps in the area. Booby traps can also be used to prevent access to specific areas. If there is urine residue from other dogs on your property, use an odor neutralizer to remove the smell. When taking your dog outdoors, you should give rewards to reinforce marking at sites where marking is permitted and marking should not be permitted anywhere else.

Would drugs be helpful?

Some cases of marking may be decreased if the pet's level of anxiety or arousal can be reduced. In these cases anti-anxiety drugs, pheromones and natural products that reduce anxiety might be useful, but are unlikely to stop marking behavior on their own.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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