

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Urine Marking in the House

Why Dogs Mark

For a dog, marking serves as a way to claim territory, publicize mating availability and to support the shared order of the pack. Dogs like hierarchy; it's what they understand, so it makes sense they communicate age, gender and status within their packs by the pheromones in urine. Although we typically see the behavior in males, both male and female animals may engage in marking behavior.

Dogs gather essential social information using their sense of smell, whether smelling other dogs directly or sniffing their urine and feces. This is why dogs urinate much more than required to simply empty their bladder. 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 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. It can also be caused from fear or anxiety and in some cases separation anxiety.

Typically it's one of two reasons: marking exists due to a lack of training or a dog uses urine marking to help make a new environment smell like home. He may mark 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 or hanging pictures on the wall!

Note: If this is a new behavior that just developed, always take your dog to the vet to rule out any medical issue; it can also be a sign of urinary tract infections or disease.

Marking: A Medical or a Behavioral Problem?

True marking is a form of communication. Most owners react negatively, and the dog is in no way communicating that they are spiteful or stupid; they are communicating that they have a medical, behavioral, or bonding problem that requires an immediate, knowledgeable, and caring response. **Yelling at the dog or punishing it will simply make the problem worse.**

Some medical issues may result in inappropriate elimination, and this can cause behavioral problems. For example, if a dog wets the bed, the scent of the urine may cause the dog to continue urinating even after any medical issue is resolved. In addition, 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 as well.

Environmental changes can also cause stress which result in behavior issues. For instance, maybe a pet-sitter the owner hired brings his own dog along, or maybe a noisy construction project begins across the street. In these examples the urine on the bed communicates, "Go away! I'll fight to protect this!" to whatever sound, scent, and/or sight frightens the dog. Animals that mark within their owners' home may be communicating they really don't want to fight at all and hope any intruder will catch a scent 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 the dog is concerned, the marking works and she continues doing it!

In addition, a fearful dog may mark their territories numerous times a day. Dogs who feel insecure in their space may only eat and drink the minimum amount. The stress elevates blood cortisol, a hormone from the adrenal glands, which can undermine the immune response. 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 that 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.

Another common scenario is if two or more dogs living together in the same house. They may regard each other as competition and are more prone to urine marking. This can be a dominance issue, and there may be no problem with one dog but when a second dog is introduced into the house then this may be the beginning of marking problems.

Sometimes marking an object in the house occurs when a new object brought into the house is something with an unfamiliar smell; the dog may mark items he feels belong to him. This can include anything that he has become possessive about. He may think you are his possession and any objects related to you are also his possessions.

The bottom line is that marking is a form of communication: the dog is telling you they have a stress or pack behavior problem or possibly a medical one. Most owners react negatively, and the dog is in no way communicating that they are spiteful or stupid, they are communicating that they have a medical, behavioral, and bonding problem that requires an immediate, knowledgeable, and caring response. **Yelling at the dog or punishing it will simply make the problem worse.** Look for environmental changes and if that is not apparent, take your dog to the veterinarian to ensure it is not a medical problem.

Don't confuse urine marking with wanting to pee

If you find large puddles of urine on the floor it is more likely that the dog had to pee and couldn't or didn't want to go out. Urine marking the dog deposits a smaller amount of urine. In addition, marking in the house is usually done to an upright surface such as a doorway, table leg or piece of furniture. The dog will lift his hind leg and mark urine on practically any object in your house.

Dog urinates in numerous locations in the house

Animals communicate their sex and status in the pheromones in their urine, which 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.

Sudden Behavior Change: recent marking in the house

Typically, this is due to feelings of insecurity, environmental changes or a perceived threat. For example, it may be an introduction of a new baby, a new pet, a visitor or even a new piece of furniture. The smell of other animals on your footwear or clothing can also trigger a dog to feel the need to mark his territory.

A new baby in the home brings new sounds, smells, and people, as well as changes in routine. Your dog may not be getting as much attention as previously. Changes cause him to feel anxious, which may cause him to mark.

Some dogs feel the need to lift their leg and pee on all new things that enter your house, shopping bags, visitor's belongings, new furniture, children's toys etc. Many of these dogs are lacking in confidence and by marking new objects it makes them feel more secure having deposited their own scent on these objects.

Some dogs will never mark in their own house but will embarrass you by marking if you visit a friend or relative's home. Your dog feels less secure there and feels the need to make it more comfortable to him by laying down a few of his own familiar scents.

How to Stop a Marking Behavior, the basics

- First consider the reason: could it be a medical reason, an environmental change, or separation anxiety? A female dog coming into heat or during it will mark to advertise her availability. A dominant female will also mark.
- Have your male dog neutered by a veterinarian. An intact male dog is much more likely to mark his territory inside the home than a neutered one.
- Supervise your male dog at all times in the house while you are training him not to mark. Confine him in a comfortable crate when you are unable to supervise and correct his marking behavior. *See below for more information.*
- Use a belly band to catch urine and to discourage territorial marking. It may actually bring the dog's attention to an instinctive behavior thereby possibly reducing marking behavior.

- Interrupt territorial marking and take him outside. Give your dog praise when he urinates appropriately. Never punish your male dog for territorial marking; it will only harm your relationship.
- Clean soiled areas with pet enzyme products and if possible restrict your dog's access to these areas. If this is not possible, remove territorial triggers such as food and water, the toy basket or beds. *See the article on carpet cleaning in the Golden Rule Dog Training Library for more information.*
- Establish yourself as the leader in your relationship with your male dog. Establishing yourself as the leader with your dog will help stabilize the relational hierarchy and reduce your male dog's drive to mark his territory.

Supervise and Break the Habit

1. You MUST catch him in the act! DOGS LEARN QUICKLY.
2. Confine your dog to one area of the house where you can watch him. Shut doors to other areas of the house or barricade them off with baby gates or improvise with whatever is at hand.
3. If barricading is not possible another option is to put your dog on a retractable lead while he is in the house with you and for you to have total control at all times.
4. Watch your dog for any signs (such as sniffing and circling) that he is even thinking about marking. The moment he begins to lift his leg say, in a stern voice, "NO"!
5. This should startle him and interrupt what he is doing. As he looks towards you give him the command in a stern voice "NO PEE"!
6. Take him outside to the potty area and wait for him to finish, then follow up with praise and a treat. This is your golden opportunity to reward him for the behavior you want and reinforce it. This is a powerful way to send the message; this is what you want him to do! If we punish for an act, we must follow up with a reward for the correct behavior to be successful.
7. You have to be consistent and diligent and continue with the behavior modification each and every time you see him attempt to mark urine.
8. **NEVER use physical punishment! This will make an insecure dog more insecure, causing more behavior issues.**

Understanding marking behavior and looking for environmental changes, or determining if the marking is due to a medical issue will help you isolate the underlying reason for your dog's behavior. Once you have determined the reason, plan your strategy of how to approach the situation with the recommendations above.

Sources:

How to Stop a Male Dog from Marking Territory in a House | eHow.com

http://www.paw-rescue.org/PAW/PETTIPS/DogTip_Marking.php

Canine Territorial Marking by Myrna Milani, BS, DVM.