

Destructive Scratching

Why Do Cats Scratch?

Although some people think a cat's scratching behavior is a reflection of his distaste for a couch's upholstery, a not-so-subtle hint to open the drapes, or a poorly conceived Zorro impersonation, the fact is that cats scratch objects in their environment for many perfectly normal reasons.

Cats like to scratch—and with good reason. They scratch to mark their territory. They scratch as a means of threatening other cats. They scratch in play. They scratch while stretching. And the act of scratching actually removes frayed and worn outer claws, exposing new, sharper ones. Unfortunately, cats can cause a lot of damage to furniture, drapes, and carpeting with their claws.

Because scratching is a normal behavior, and one that cats are highly motivated to display, it's unrealistic to try to prevent them from scratching. Instead, the goal in resolving scratching problems is to redirect the scratching onto acceptable objects.

Training Your Cat to Scratch Acceptable Objects

1 You must provide objects for scratching that are appealing, attractive, and convenient from your cat's point of view. Start by observing the physical features of the objects your cat is scratching. The answers to the following questions will help you understand your cat's scratching preferences:

- Where are they located? Prominent objects, objects close to sleeping areas, and objects near the entrance to a room are often chosen.
- What texture do they have—are they soft or coarse?
- What shape do they have—are they horizontal or vertical?
- How tall are they? At what height does your cat scratch?

2 Now, considering your cat's demonstrated preferences, substitute similar objects for her to scratch (rope-wrapped posts, corrugated cardboard, or even a log). Place the acceptable object(s) near the inappropriate object(s) that she's already using. Make sure the objects are stable and won't fall over or move around when she uses them.

3 Cover the inappropriate objects with something your cat will find unappealing, such as double-sided sticky tape, aluminum foil, sheets of sandpaper, or a plastic carpet runner with the pointy side up. Or you may give the objects an aversive odor by attaching cotton balls containing perfume, a muscle rub, or other safe yet unpleasant substance. Be careful with odors, though, because you don't want the nearby acceptable objects to also smell unpleasant.



4 When your cat is consistently using the appropriate object, it can be moved very grad-

ually (no more than three inches each day) to a location more suitable to you. It's best, however, to keep the appropriate scratching objects as close to your cat's preferred scratching locations as possible.

5 Don't remove the unappealing coverings or odors from the inappropriate objects until your cat is consistently using the appropriate objects in their permanent locations for several weeks, or even a month. They should then be removed gradually, not all at once.

Should I Punish My Cat for Scratching?

No! Punishment is effective only if you catch your cat in the act of scratching unacceptable objects and have provided her with acceptable scratching objects. Punishment after the fact won't change the behavior, may cause her to be afraid of you or the environment, and may elicit defensive aggression. Used by itself, punishment won't resolve scratching problems because it doesn't teach your cat where to scratch instead. If you do catch your cat in the act of scratching inappropriate objects, punish her in a way that prevents her from associating the punishment with you. Try making a loud noise (using a whistle, shaking a soda can filled with rocks, or slapping the wall) or using a water-filled squirt bottle. If you use other, more interactive techniques, she'll learn to refrain from scratching in your presence but will continue to scratch when you're not around.

How Do I Trim My Cat's Claws?

To help keep them sharp, cats keep their claws retracted until they're needed. As the claws grow too long and become curved, they can't be retracted completely. You should clip off the sharp tips of your cat's claws on her front feet every two weeks or so. Clipping your cat's claws will also help prevent them from becoming snagged in carpets and fabrics, not to mention your skin!

Before trimming your cat's claws, help her get accustomed to having her paws handled and squeezed. You can do this by gently petting her legs and paws while giving her a treat. This will help to make it a more pleasant experience. Gradually increase the pressure so that petting becomes gentle squeezing, as you'll need to do this to extend the claw. Continue with the treats until your cat tolerates this kind of touching and restraint. It may take a little longer if she's not used to having her legs or paws handled.

Apply a small amount of pressure to her paw—with your thumb on top of her paw and your index finger underneath—until a claw is extended. You should be able to see the pink or "quick," which is a small blood vessel. Don't cut into this pink portion, as it will bleed and be painful for your cat. If you cut off just the sharp tip of the



claw, the "hook," it will dull the claw and prevent extensive damage to household objects and to your skin.

There are several types of claw trimmers designed especially for pets. These are better than your own nail clipper because they won't crush the claw. Until you and your cat have become accustomed to the routine, one claw or foot a day is enough of a challenge. Don't push to do all of them at once, or you'll both have only negative memories of claw clippers!

WHAT TO DO:

- Provide your cat with a variety of scratching posts—cardboard, carpeting, wood, upholstery, etc. Some cats prefer horizontal posts and others prefer vertical posts, while still others favor slanted posts. Some cats like pile carpeting, while others will only scratch on sisal. Some prefer a longitudinal grain for raking, while others like a latitudinal grain for picking. Once you ascertain your cat's personal preferences, provide additional posts in various locations. All cats should have a sturdy post that won't shift or collapse when used. Cats also like a post that is tall enough so they can stretch fully—presumably why they like drapes so much!
- Encourage the cat to investigate the posts by scenting them with catnip or hanging toys at the tops of the posts. Take care to place posts in areas where the cat will be inclined to climb on them.
- Discourage inappropriate scratching by removing or covering desirable objects in your home. Turn speakers to the wall. Use plastic, double-sided sticky tape, sandpaper or vinyl carpet runner (turned upside-down to expose the knobby feet) on furniture or on the floor where the cat would stand to scratch. Place scratching posts adjacent to these objects.
- Clip the cat's nails regularly.
- Consider using plastic caps (Soft Paws™) for the cat's nails. These caps attach to the nails with an adhesive so that if the cat scratches, no damage is done. The caps are temporary, lasting about 4 to 6 weeks.
- If, and only if, you catch your cat in the act of scratching an inappropriate object, you may try startling the cat by clapping your hands or squirting her with water. Do this sparingly because the cat may associate you with this startling event and come to fear you.

WHAT NOT TO DO:

- Do not hold your cat up to the scratching post and force her to drag her claws on it. This procedure may frighten the cat and teach her to avoid the scratching post completely.
- Do not throw away your cat's favorite scratching post when it becomes unsightly. Cats prefer shredded and torn objects because they can really get their claws into the fabric—and best of all, the object is infiltrated with their scent.

Should I Declaw My Cat?

Declawing is a procedure whereby a veterinarian amputates the end digit and claw of a cat's paws—similar in scope to cutting off a person's finger at the last joint. The Humane Society of the United States opposes declawing when done solely for the convenience of the owner. Scratching is a natural behavior for cats and can be directed to appropriate items.

There is just as much evidence to support the case against declawing as there is research to refute it, with some studies finding few or only short-term adverse reactions to the surgery and others finding medical complications and significant differences in behavior. Declawing is almost never medically or behaviorally necessary, and should never be considered routine or done preemptively. The success of campaigns for spaying and neutering may have inadvertently normalized the idea of routine surgical intervention to reshape cat behavior. This idea is reinforced by the linkage between the two practices in small-animal veterinary practices, where declaw and spay/neuter packages are routine. Kittens begin to retract their claws at 28-days-old and begin to scratch at 35-days-old. Thus, 8-week-old kittens are just beginning to scratch when they are adopted into new homes and can be introduced immediately to scratching posts and other acceptable objects to satisfy their need to scratch.



Mobile SPCA

620 Zeigler Circle West
Mobile, AL 36608

633-3531

spca@mobilespca.org



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