

Cats: Destructive Scratching

Why Do Cats Scratch?

It's normal for cats to scratch objects in their environment for many reasons:

- To remove the dead outer layer of their claws.
- To mark their territory by leaving both a visual mark and a scent – they have scent glands on their paws.
- To stretch their bodies and flex their feet and claws.
- To work off energy.

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 areas 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 unpleasant odor. 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 gradually (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.

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If you do catch her in the act of scratching inappropriate objects, remote punishment is best, in which you do not directly interact with her. Ideas for remote punishment include making a loud noise (using a whistle, shaking a pop can filled with rocks or slapping the wall), throwing a pillow at her or using a water-filled squirt bottle. If punishment is interactive, 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 except when 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 all four feet every week or so. Clipping your cat's claws will also help prevent them from becoming snagged in carpets, fabrics, and skin.

Before trimming your cat's claws, accustom her 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 foot a day is enough of a challenge. Don't push to do all four at once, or you'll both have only negative memories of claw clippers!

Should I Declaw My Cat?

We strongly discourage cat owners from having their cats declawed. Scratching is a natural behavior for cats and can be directed to appropriate items. However, if you feel that you must either declaw or give up your cat, we would rather see your cat stay in her home and be your lifelong companion. If you do decide to have your cat declawed, we suggest you have the surgery done at the same time she's spayed (or neutered if your cat is a male), that you only declaw the front paws and that you always keep your cat indoors.

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