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Scratching Behavior in Cats

Why do cats scratch?

Scratching is a normal feline behavior. Although scratching does serve to shorten and condition the claws, other important reasons why cats scratch are to mark their territory (both visibly and with the scent of the foot pads) and to stretch. Some cats may increase their territorial marking (e.g. scratching, urine marking) in situations of anxiety or conflict. Cats may also threaten or play with a swipe of their paws.

"Scratching does serve to shorten and condition the claws..."

For cats that live primarily outdoors, scratching is seldom a problem for the owners. Scratching is usually directed at prominent objects such as tree trunks or fence posts. Play swatting with other cats seldom leads to injuries because cats have a fairly thick skin and coat for protection. When play does get a little rough, most cats are pretty good at sorting things out between themselves. Occasionally, rough play or territorial fighting does lead to injuries or abscesses that would require veterinary attention.

Cats that live primarily or exclusively indoors may run into disfavor with their owners when they begin to scratch furniture, walls, or doors, or when they use their claws to climb up, or hang from the drapes. Claws can also cause injuries to people when the cats are overly playful or don't like a particular type of handling or restraint. With a good understanding of cat behavior and a little bit of effort, it should be possible to prevent or avoid most clawing problems, even for those cats that live exclusively indoors.

How can I stop my cat from scratching?

It is impractical and unfair to expect cats to stop scratching entirely. Cats that go outside may be content to do all their scratching outdoors, but the urge may still arise when the cat comes back indoors. Cats that spend most of their time indoors will need outlets for their scratching and marking behaviors. If you don't provide appropriate outlets for your cat, don't be surprised if you come home to find objects strewn all over the floor, scratches on your furniture, and your cat playfully climbing or dangling from your drapes. While it may not be possible to stop a cat from scratching, it should be possible to direct the scratching, climbing and play to appropriate areas indoors. Building or designing a user friendly scratching post, providing a regular daily routine of social play, object play and exercise, and keeping the cat away from potential problem areas will usually be adequate to deal with most scratching problems. Further details on providing an enriched indoor environment and encouraging appropriate play are discussed in separate handouts.



How do I design a scratching area for my cat?

Since cats use their scratching posts for marking and stretching as well as sharpening their claws, posts should be set up in prominent areas, with at least one close to the cat's sleeping quarters. The post should be tall enough for the cat to scratch while standing on hind legs with the forelegs extended, and sturdy enough so that it does not topple when scratched. Some cats prefer a scratching post with a corner so that two sides can be scratched at once while other cats may prefer a horizontal scratching post. Special consideration should be given to the surface texture of the post. Commercial posts are often covered with tightly woven material for durability, but many cats prefer a loosely woven material where the claws can hook and tear during scratching. Remember that scratching is also a marking behavior and cats want to leave a visual mark.

"Be certain to use a material that appeals to your cat."

Carpet may be an acceptable covering but it should be combed first to make certain that there are no tight loops. Some cats prefer sisal, a piece of material from an old chair, or even bare wood for scratching. Be certain to use a material that appeals to your cat. If the cat has consistently scratched a piece of furniture that is now going to be replaced, salvaging some of the material and covering a scratching post with that material may help attract the cat to the scratching post.

Another alternative is a food-dispensing cat-scratching device called "Pavlov's Cat".

How can I get my cat to use its post?



Placement is important when trying to entice your cat to use a scratching post. Because scratching is also a marking behavior, most cats prefer to use a post that is placed in a prominent location. It may be necessary to place the post in the center of a room or near furniture that the cat was trying to scratch until the cat reliably uses it and then move it to a less obtrusive location.

Even after you move it, the post may need to remain in the room where the cat spends a great deal of time and wishes to leave its "message". A good way to get the cat to approach and use the post is to turn the scratching area into an interesting and desirable play center. Perches to climb on, space to climb into, and toys mounted on ropes or springs are highly appealing to most cats. Placing a few play toys, cardboard boxes, catnip treats, or even the food bowl in the area should help to keep the cat occupied. Sometimes rubbing the post with tuna oil will increase its attractiveness. Food rewards can also be given if the owner observes the cat scratching at its post. Products have been designed to reward the cat automatically by dispensing food rewards each time the cat scratches. It may also be helpful to take the cat to the post, gently rub its paws along the post in a scratching motion, and give it a food reward. This technique should not be attempted, however, if it causes any fear or anxiety. For some cats, multiple posts in several locations will be necessary.

What can I do if the cat continues to scratch my furniture?

Despite the best of plans and the finest of scratching posts, some cats may continue to scratch or climb in inappropriate areas. In these cases, the first step is to determine whether the scratching is excessive and whether anxiety is a factor. Scratching of new areas and sites may be related to anxiety and marking behavior. Sometimes, the scratching problem is related to a change in the household such as the introduction of a new cat, moving or a change in the family's schedule. Other signs of anxiety such as a change in appetite, a change in social behavior (e.g. more aggressive or more withdrawn),

or the onset of urine marking may also occur. When, where and how often the cat scratches might be a clue as to the possible cause. If the cat is not satisfied to scratch in one or two selected areas, then look at the environmental and household factors that might lead to anxiety. If the cat scratches new objects or furniture in the home, this might be a marking behavior. Cats that scratch in a particular room or on a particular person's possessions may have a relationship problem that might need to be resolved. Providing the cat with a more enriched daily routine, including multiple feeding sessions, additional opportunities for social / predatory play, and new objects to manipulate and explore, may help to better settle the cat at times when it might otherwise be scratching. In addition to determining the cause and trying to resolve the underlying anxiety, the feline facial pheromone Feliway™ may be useful to reduce marking when sprayed on the inappropriate locations (but should not be used to deter normal marking of preferred scratching sites).

If the scratching is not anxiety related, but the targets of scratching are undesirable for the owner, a little time, effort, and ingenuity might be necessary. The first thing to consider is partial confinement or "cat-proofing" your home when you are not around to supervise. If the problem occurs in a few rooms, consider making them out of bounds by closing off a few doors or by using child-proofing techniques such as child locks or barricades. The cat may even have to be kept in a single room that has been effectively cat proofed whenever the owner cannot supervise. Of course the cat's scratching post, play center, toys, and litter box should be located in this cat-proof room.

If cat-proofing is not possible or the cat continues to use one or two pieces of furniture, you might want to consider moving the furniture, or placing a scratching post directly in front of the furniture that is being scratched. Take a good look at the surfaces of the scratched furniture and ensure that the surface of the post is covered with a material similar to those for which the cat has shown a preference. Some scratching posts are even designed to be wall mounted or hung on doors. Placing additional scratching posts in strategic areas may also be helpful for some cats. Another option is to try using a feline facial scent on scratched surfaces. This may help to reduce scratching at these sites but the cat will still need alternate areas to scratch. Keeping the cat's nails properly trimmed or using commercially available plastic nail covers are also useful techniques for some owners.

How do I punish my cat for inappropriate scratching?

All forms of physical punishment should be avoided since they can cause fear or aggression toward the owners, and at best, the cat will only learn to stop the scratching while the owner is around. Indirect, non-physical forms of punishment may be useful if the owner can remain out of sight while administering the punishment. In this way the cat may learn that scratching is unpleasant even when the owner is not present. Water rifles, ultrasonic or audible alarms, or remote controlled devices are sometimes useful.

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Generally, the best deterrents are those that train the pet not to scratch, even in the owner's absence. If the surface or area can be made less appealing or unpleasant, the cat will likely seek out alternative areas or target for scratching, (hopefully acceptable scratching posts). The simplest approach is to cover the scratched surface with a less appealing material (plastic, a loosely draped piece of material, aluminum foil, or double-sided tape). Another effective deterrent is to booby trap problem areas so that either scratching or approaching the area is unpleasant for the cat (e.g. motion detector air spray, motion detector alarm, odor repellents or a stack of plastic cups that is set to topple when the cat scratches). (See our handout on 'Behavior Management Products'). Of course, neither remote punishment nor booby traps will successfully deter inappropriate scratching unless the cat has an alternative scratching area that is comfortable, appealing, well located, and free of all deterrents.

My cat is using her claws to injure family members, what should I do?

The first thing you need to do is determine why the cat feels the need to use her claws. If the cat uses its claws on the owners in play or when climbing onto or jumping off of the owner's lap, try keeping the nails trimmed, or redirecting the cat to acceptable play behavior. If the cat is anxious, fearful or frustrated, then she may be using her claws to escape. In these cases, it is important to identify and prevent situations in which the cat might use its claws. A more in-depth behavioral assessment is needed to determine why your cat is clawing at family members.

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

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