

Cats and Scratching

Scratching is natural behavior for cats, and every cat will need to do it -- even cats without claws -- so if we want to keep our prized possessions from becoming scratching posts, we need to understand our cats' needs and fill them. Scratching is an instinctual behavior; cats use it to shed the outer layers of their claws, to leave a scent and a visual marker to let other cats know they've been there, to stretch their muscles and relax, and to work off energy or excitement. We can't convince them not to do it, but we can work with their instincts.

How Your Cat Scratches is Important

If you understand the way cats like to scratch, you can cater to their preferences when you provide them with outlets like scratching posts or pads, cardboard scratchers, or even logs. Give your cat enough room, allowing them to hook their claws and pull down or back enough to get a good stretch. Some cats are vertical scratchers, and some have a preference for horizontal surfaces, so watch your cat to figure out what they like, or provide them with both options. Cats don't like to scratch on something that feels shaky or unsteady, so make sure whatever you give your cat, it's securely anchored or has a wide enough base to keep it from tipping.

Texture is important. Most cats like something that provides resistance to their claws but doesn't catch them too much: sisal, rope, carpet, cardboard, bark. Once again, look at your cat's particular preferences.

Location counts as well. Multiple scratching posts, near where your cat likes to sleep and around entrances to rooms, will be best. If your cat has already established where they like to scratch, locate your approved posts in those places.

Get Your Cat to Scratch Where You Want Them To

Teaching your cat to scratch on your terms will take a combined approach. First make sure you've given your cat scratching options they find attractive, located in the places they prefer -- right next to the arm of the couch, for example. If your cat likes catnip, you can rub or spray your new options with that. Then make the places you don't want them to scratch unappealing; you can cover those locations with aluminum foil, double-sided tape or a sheet.

When your cat scratches in the right places, praise them and occasionally offer a treat. If they go to scratch somewhere you don't want them to, interrupt them with a sound (try to make it one they won't associate with you!).

You may also try Feliway products, which simulates feline facial pheromones that cats naturally use to mark spaces in their territory. It comes in a spray as well as a plug-in diffuser. You can use the spray on vertical surfaces in areas where your cat likes to hang out including doorways, corners of furniture,, corners of walls and scratching posts. Feliway comes in a few different formulas; one for single cats and one for multi-cat households and, most recently, FeliScratch for scratching posts. It doesn't work with all cats, but many cat owners report excellent results. Look for suppliers on the Web, or check with your local pet store or with your vet.

As your cat consistently uses their approved scratching spots, you can gradually (a few inches at a time) move them toward the places you want them permanently. Don't take anything you have used to cover spots where your cat used to scratch away from the places you've put them until your cat has been using the right places in their permanent spots for at least a few weeks.