

Destructive Cats - 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 provide more appropriate scratching surfaces other than our furniture or drapes.

Understand how your cat scratches

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 or wobbling. If an item feels unsteady when your cat tries to scratch on it they aren't likely to try it again so make sure you do your research to find a good quality scratching post

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.



Additional Resources

Please contact our Behavior Team to speak with a skilled behavior specialist.

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To prevent damage to your possessions while you teach your cat to scratch in the right places, you can easily trim your cat's claws; if you don't know how, ask your veterinarian or groomer to show you. You can also use Soft Paws, soft caps that you can apply about every four to six weeks to your cat's claws.

Never punish your cat for scratching. This will only confuse your cat and could cause more behavioral problems. Instead, interrupt your cat and think of ways you can make that location less desirable for your cat.

Location counts as well. Multiple scratching options, 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.

Getting Your Cat To Scratch Where You Want

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.

Before You Declaw Your Cat

If you're thinking about declawing your cat, there's a lot for you to consider first. There are plenty of other, better options to deal with inappropriate scratching, including teaching your cat where it's appropriate to scratch, trimming your cat's nails, or applying caps to their claws.

Removing a cat's claws isn't like having their nails trimmed; it's serious surgery involving amputation of the last bone in each of your cat's toes. The recovery period is painful, and your cat will need to walk, jump, and scratch in their litter box during that period. The discomfort they experience can change their litter box habits -- they may begin to associate their box with the pain in their toes, which may lead to not using the litter box some or most of the time.

A cat without claws is at the mercy of any predators they encounter. If you allow your cat outdoors or your cat gets out, this vulnerability could kill them. Some cats, having lost their claws as a means of defense, resort more quickly to biting when they feel threatened or anxious.