



# Cats: Destructive Scratching

## Why Do Cats Scratch?

- 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 muscles and flex their feet and claws.
- To work off extra energy.

Because scratching is a normal behavior, it's unrealistic and unfair to try to prevent them from scratching. Instead, the goal in resolving scratching problems is to redirect the scratching onto acceptable objects.

## Teaching 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 the objects 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? Carpeted? Wood?
- What shape do they have—are they horizontal or vertical?
- How tall are they? At what height does your cat scratch?

2. Considering your cat's preferences, substitute similar objects for her to scratch, such as 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; 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.

Remember that it's best 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 at least several weeks. They can then be removed gradually, not all at once.

### **Should I Punish My Cat For Scratching?**

No! Punishment won't resolve scratching problems because it doesn't teach your cat where to scratch instead. Punishment after the fact may cause her to be afraid of you or the environment and may elicit more unwanted behaviors like scratching or biting. 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 Nails?**

To help keep them sharp, cats keep their nails retracted except when they're needed. As the nails grow too long and become curved, they can't be retracted completely. You should clip off the sharp tips of your cat's nails on all four feet every week or two. Clipping your cat's nails will also help prevent them from becoming snagged in carpets, fabrics, and skin.

Before trimming your cat's nails, 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. Including the treat 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 nail. 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 nail is extended. You should be able to see the internal pink part of the nail, called the 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 nail, it will dull the nail and prevent extensive damage to household objects and to your skin.

There are several types of nail trimmers designed especially for pets. These are better than your own nail clipper because they won't crush the nail. 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 a negative association with nail trimming.

## **Should I Declaw My Cat?**

NO! We strongly discourage cat owners from having their cats declawed. Scratching is a natural behavior for cats and can be directed to appropriate items, such as a cat scratching post. Without the ability to scratch, your cat may develop behavior problems that you have not previously experienced. Painful arthritis, house soiling, and excessive biting are all consequences of declawing.

Instead, if it is necessary for you to have a declawed cat, visit your local animal shelter and ask about adopting a cat who has already been declawed.