

## **Why Cats Scratch**

By understanding your cat's scratching behavior, you can prevent damage to your home.

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One of the most common complaints cat owners have is that their feline friends destroy furniture, draperies, screens or other property with their claws. Destructive scratching is so widespread that an entire industry has emerged, producing scratching products as well as self-help books and audiotapes.

Scratching is a serious problem in some households but can be reduced or resolved if approached properly. To understand destructive scratching and the ways to resolve it, you first must understand a little about cat social organization and communication.

### **The Basics**

Why do cats scratch? The short answer is because scratching is an instinctive behavior. The long answer is much more interesting. Observations of feral cats and other outdoor cats show that cats are frequently territorial, letting other cats know of their presence by leaving visual and scent marks. To mark territory, cats spray urine on objects or rub their heads, mouths and tails on things, leaving scent marks behind. Cats also mark territory by scratching tree trunks, posts, the corners of buildings or other conspicuous objects in their environment. This behavior, animal behaviorists believe, leaves clear visual marks as well as scent marks for other

cats. The scratching behavior is characterized by the cat stretching out its body, reaching up the tree or post and alternatively dragging one forepaw, then the other, across the surface.

Scratching behavior may have other functions. Because scratching frequently occurs after naps, some people believe it allows the cat to stretch out tight muscles in the body and legs. Others believe the behavior helps the cat remove the outer layers of its claws to keep them in good condition.

Animal behaviorists currently believe that the primary function of scratching is communication and that stretching and claw conditioning are only secondary functions. This belief stems from many reasons. First, cats can condition their claws without scratching by removing the worn sheaths with their teeth. Most cats use this method to condition their back claws. Second, declawed cats seem able to stretch tight muscles adequately without scratching. Third, cats tend to scratch the same trees or posts again and again, leaving the surfaces visibly worn. If the behavior stemmed only from a need to stretch or condition claws, a cat would scratch wherever it had the urge, not in just a few conspicuous places. Finally, some evidence shows that cats are more likely to scratch objects in the presence of other cats or after spraying an object with urine.

While scratching behavior is fascinating when observed in outdoor cats, owners of indoor cats seldom hold the same scientific detachment when the cat shreds the arm of a \$1,500 sofa. Clearly the behavior is the same, but when

property damage occurs, the results cause much more concern.

How can you prevent or stop damage from cat scratching? Three basic approaches exist. You can change the environment, making it difficult for your cat to scratch inappropriate items; you can modify the cat's behavior using rewards or punishment; or you can alter the cat's claws to prevent damage. As with most behavior problems, preventing the behavior is much easier than stopping an ongoing problem.

### **The Environmental Approach**

The environmental approach to preventing scratching involves offering the cat an attractive scratching post and making other areas unattractive. Because scratching is a natural, instinctive behavior, it is almost impossible to prevent or stop it entirely. You can, however, reduce or eliminate destruction of property by encouraging your cat to scratch a designated scratching post or another object.

The structure, texture and location of the post are critical to getting the cat to use it. In *Canine and Feline Behavioral Therapy*, Drs. Ben and Lynette Hart offer sound advice about scratching posts. Make sure an upright post is stable, they suggest, so it will not tip over. Observe your cat's scratching behavior to determine which type of surface it prefers. For example, some cats prefer horizontal surfaces to the standard vertical ones. If you offer your cat a horizontal scratching board, make sure the board will not tip over or move around when the cat attempts to scratch.

When choosing an upright post, select one with a scratching surface that extends three feet (36") or more above the base. The size of the cat should determine the size of the post: smaller cats need smaller posts, while larger cats need larger posts. Cats seem to prefer flat boards or posts with corners edges that also can be scratched. If your cat prefers horizontal scratching, offer a board that is 6 to 8 inches wide and at least 12 to 16 inches long.

Preference studies by Dr. Ben Hart show that the texture of the scratching post's covering is critical to whether the cat will use it. Cats vary in their individual texture preferences, but they tend to prefer loosely woven fabrics with a vertical weave that shred easily. In fact, cats seem to prefer scratching posts where the material is quite shredded and worn. This makes sense when you remember that the major function of scratching is to leave a highly visible mark-the more tattered the covering, the more visible it is. Because cats tend to prefer worn post coverings to new ones, don't replace the coverings too soon. Leave the covering until it falls off or the cat loses interest in the post.

The least preferred material seems to be a tightly woven, knobby fabric. The fabric tends to catch the claws, not allowing them to easily shred the material. To make a post covered with such a fabric more attractive to your cat, cover it with a loosely woven fabric.

The location of the post is important, too. Cats like to scratch soon after waking up, so place the post near the sleeping area. Cats often scratch in conspicuous places, which may explain

why your cat prefers to scratch the arm of the couch rather than a post placed in a rarely used back room. In this case, placing a post near highly visible, heavily traveled areas may help modify the behavior. To divert your cat from an inappropriate area, place a scratching post in front of the object that is already being scratched.

Some cats seem to scratch posts as part of a greeting ritual with people. In this case, locating posts near doors may be helpful. In general, cats scratch in several locations, so having several posts is a good idea, especially in multicat households.

You can break established scratching habits with consistent, diligent attempts. The key is not to try to change or prevent the behavior but rather to change the preference for the location or surface for scratching. In general, preferences are most easily changed by making the new location or surface—the post—as attractive as possible while making the old location or surface—the damaged property—as unattractive as possible.

To make the damaged property unattractive, you should cover it with something unpleasant to scratch, such as a plastic rug runner, or something with a different texture, such as a nubby fabric. Then cover the post with something attractive, such as a loose woven fabric, and place it directly in front of the damaged area. If the location is inconvenient, gradually move the post to another location once the cat is scratching reliably.

Damage from cat claws can result from activities other than scratching. Cats can

damage property with their front or back claws while jumping up or down from elevated surfaces such as bookshelves, climbing objects such as screen doors or moving quickly across smooth surfaces such as oak tables. Damage usually results from the cat using its claws to get traction on smooth, angled or vertical surfaces. The behavior is not the same as scratching, and you may need to use different approaches to correct it.

To prevent your cat from damaging property by climbing, jumping or running across it, make the areas inaccessible or modify them so they give the cat an unpleasant experience. You can do this in a variety of ways. To make drapes or screens impossible to climb, cover them with thick, smooth plastic. Cover counters, tables or the tops of stereo speakers with plastic rug runners turned pointy side up, creating an unpleasant surface for the cat to walk or sit on. Electronic mats such as the Scat Mat (Contech Electronics Inc., Dept. CF, P.O. Box 115, Saanichton, British Columbia, Canada V05 1M0) or vibration sensors such as the TattleTale (K-II Enterprises, Dept. CF, P.O. Box 306, Camillus, NY 13031) can make surfaces unpleasant, too, and help reduce potential damage.

### **Behavioral Approaches**

Sometimes simply providing an attractive scratching post and making an inappropriate area unattractive is all you need to do to get a cat to scratch appropriately. If you offer a kitten or a newly acquired adult cat a post with characteristics described earlier, the cat will be more likely to use the post and less likely to develop bad scratching habits. In other cases, however,

environmental modifications are not enough to prevent or stop scratching problems.

A cat doesn't necessarily scratch a post simply because it is there. The cat may need encouragement. This does not mean you should take your cat to the post and forcibly drag the animal's claws over the covering. Some people advocate this approach, believing the experience of scratching the post or the scent marks left on the post from scratching will attract the cat back in the future. If you frighten the cat with a forceful experience, however, the cat will learn to avoid the post as well as you. You should make the scratching experience pleasant by using encouragement.

You can encourage your cat to scratch by dangling a toy or a piece of string on the post. As the cat attempts to grab the toy, it may be encouraged to scratch. Rewarding spontaneous scratching on the post with praise, petting or a tasty tidbit can help, too. Finally, you may encourage your cat to scratch the post by making scratching movements against the post as the cat watches. It may imitate your behavior.

Punishing scratching behavior is rarely successful in stopping it. You aren't always able to catch your cat in the act of scratching, so you deliver inconsistent punishments. At best, you may stop the destruction in your presence but not at other times. At worst, the destruction continues and the cat becomes afraid of you, disrupting your relationship. If you catch your cat in the act of scratching an inappropriate object, you can stop the behavior with a remote punishment, such

as a squirt of water or a sudden loud noise. Better yet, gently take the cat to its scratching post and encourage it to scratch using the techniques described above.

### **Modifications of the Claws**

If environmental and behavioral approaches do not stop damage to property, you may need to alter your cat's claws. The easiest and most humane way to do so is to regularly trim the cat's claws. Blunt claws do less damage than sharp ones. Trim the claws about once a week, and always avoid the blood vessels and nerves in the base of the claws so you do not injure the cat. If you aren't sure how to trim your cat's claws, ask your veterinarian to show you.

Another option is to apply soft plastic coverings, such as Soft Paws, to the claws. The coverings reduce damage, are safe for cats and attach easily to claws with a nontoxic adhesive. The only disadvantage is that the coverings fall off with the claw sheaths every few weeks and must be replaced. If you're interested in this option, talk to your veterinarian.

You should not choose the surgical procedure of declawing without carefully considering all other options. As with any surgical procedure, the cat will experience discomfort immediately following the surgery, and some risk of surgical complications exists. Declawing does reduce the ability of a cat to defend itself against predators such as dogs and coyotes, so you should restrict a declawed cat's outdoor activities.