

CAT SCRATCHING

Why do cat's scratch?

Scratching is a perfectly normal feline behaviour. It is recognised as having at least four functions, namely: to remove the worn outer claw sheath, to stretch and condition the apparatus needed for protraction and retraction of the claws, to leave a visual mark to communicate to other cats in the neighbourhood and to leave a chemical signal by depositing scent from glands on the pads.

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 and often at the boundary of territories.

Cats that live primarily or exclusively indoors may begin to scratch furniture, walls, or doors, or use their claws to climb up, or hang from the curtains. With a good understanding of cat behaviour and a little bit of effort, it should be possible to prevent or avoid most scratching problems, even for those cats that live exclusively indoors.

Cats that go outdoors may be content to scratch when outside, and leave the walls and furniture intact when indoors. Cats that spend most of their time indoors, however, will require an area for indoor scratching and if one is not provided they will seek out suitable sites.

How can I stop my cat from scratching?

It is impractical and unacceptable 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 of course, need some outlet for their scratching and marking behaviours. If such outlets are not provided you should not be surprised if you come home to objects strewn all over the floor, scratches on your furniture, and your cat playfully climbing or dangling from your curtains. 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 scratching post, providing appropriate play toys, and keeping the cat away from potential problem areas will usually be adequate to deal with most scratching problems.

How do I design a scratching area for my cat?

Since cats use their scratching posts for marking and stretching, 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 its 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, scratching is also a marking behaviour and cats want to leave a visual mark. Carpet may be an acceptable covering but it should be combed first to make certain that there are no tight loops. Some cats prefer a piece of material from an old chair, or even bare wood for scratching. Be certain to use a material that appeals to your individual cat.

How can I get my cat to use its post?

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 centre. Perches to climb on, spaces 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 signs of fear or anxiety. Placement is important when trying to entice your cat to use a scratching post. Because scratching is also a marking behaviour, most cats prefer to use a post that is placed in a prominent location. It may be necessary to place the post in the centre of a room or near furniture that the cat was previously trying to scratch. It should be left in that location until the cat reliably uses it and then you should be able to move it to a less obtrusive location. 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 plans and the finest scratching posts, some cats may continue to scratch or climb in inappropriate areas. At this point 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 childproofing techniques such as child locks or child gates. 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 centre, toys, and litter tray 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, but not the same as, 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. Keeping the cat's claws properly trimmed or using 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 distraction may be useful if the owner can remain out of sight while administering them since the cat may learn that scratching is unpleasant even when the owner is not present.

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 usually seek out a new area or target for scratching, and if the scratching post is made particularly appealing that is the most likely location to be selected. The simplest approach is to cover the scratched surface with a less appealing material (plastic or a loosely draped piece of material). Of course such techniques will not successfully deter inappropriate scratching, unless the cat has an alternative scratching area that is comfortable, appealing, well located, and free of all deterrents.

Always treat the cause

Scratching is an important marking behaviour for cats and when it is displayed within the home it is important to consider the possible causes of indoor marking. Such behaviour is often linked to challenges to the cat's security and to problems of anxiety or fear. In order to deal with scratching effectively it is essential to take a detailed behavioural history and pinpoint the true motivation for the behaviour so that the cause and not only the symptoms can be treated. For this reason, surgical declawing is generally frowned upon in this country.