

Destructive Scratching in Cats

Although some people think a cat's scratching behavior is a reflection of her distaste for a couch's upholstery, a not-so-subtle hint to open the drapes, or a poorly conceived Zorro impersonation, the fact is that cats scratch objects in their environment for many perfectly normal reasons.

Why Do Cats Scratch? -- Cats scratch for many reasons, including:

- 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 bodies and flex their feet and claws.
- To work off energy.

Because scratching is a normal behavior and one that cats are highly motivated to display, it's unrealistic to try to prevent them from scratching. Instead, the goal in resolving scratching problems is to redirect the scratching onto acceptable objects.

Training Your Cat to Scratch Acceptable Objects -- **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 they located? Prominent objects, objects close to sleeping areas, and objects near the entrance to a room are often chosen.
- What texture do they have—are they soft or coarse?
- What shape do they have—are they horizontal or vertical?
- How tall are they?
- At what height does your cat scratch?

Now, considering your cat's demonstrated preferences, substitute similar objects for her to scratch (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. Cover the inappropriate objects with something your cat will find unappealing, such as double-sided sticky tape, aluminum foil, 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 safe yet unpleasant substances. Be careful with odors, though, because you don't want the nearby acceptable objects to also smell unpleasant. 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. It's best, however, to keep the appropriate scratching objects as close to your cat's preferred scratching locations as possible. 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 several weeks, or even a month. They should then be removed gradually, not all at once.

Should I Punish My Cat for Scratching? -- No! Punishment is effective only if you catch your cat in the act of scratching unacceptable objects and have provided her with acceptable scratching objects. Punishment after the fact won't change the behavior, may cause her to be afraid of you or the environment, and may elicit defensive aggression. Used by itself, punishment won't resolve scratching problems because it doesn't teach your cat where to scratch instead. If you do catch your cat in the act of scratching inappropriate objects, punish her in a way that prevents her from associating the punishment with you. If you don't, then your cat will very quickly figure out that "I can scratch here when my owner's not in the room." Try making a loud noise (using a whistle, shaking a soda can filled with rocks, or slapping the wall) or using a water-filled squirt bottle. Never throw any object directly at your cat. Doing so may cause your cat to become very fearful of you. As previously mentioned, if you use other, more interactive techniques, she'll learn to refrain from scratching in your presence but will continue to scratch when you're not around. The best method is to reward appropriate scratching behavior while minimizing your reaction to (or ignoring) the inappropriate scratching behavior.

How Do I Trim My Cat's Claws? -- To help keep them sharp, cats keep their claws retracted until they're needed. As the claws grow too long and become curved, they can't be retracted completely. You should clip off the sharp tips of your cat's claws on her front feet every two weeks or so. Clipping your cat's claws will also help prevent them from becoming snagged in carpets and fabrics, not to mention your skin!

Before trimming your cat's claws, help her get accustomed to having her paws handled and squeezed. You can do this by gently petting her legs and paws while giving her a treat. This 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 claw. 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 claw is extended. You should be able to see the pink or "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 claw, the "hook," it will dull the claw and prevent extensive damage to household objects and to your skin. There are several types of claw trimmers designed especially for pets. These are better than your own nail clipper because they won't crush the claw.

Until you and your cat have become accustomed to the routine, one claw or foot a day is enough of a challenge. Don't push to do all of them at once, or you'll both have only negative memories of claw clippers!

Should I Declaw My Cat? -- **Declawing** is a procedure whereby a veterinarian amputates the end digit and claw of cat's paws—similar in scope to cutting off a person's finger at the last joint.

The Cleveland Animal Protective League opposes declawing when done solely for the convenience of the owner. Scratching is a natural behavior for cats and can be directed to appropriate items. *Declawing can also lead to litter box or aggression problems.*

A more humane alternative to declawing would be to use soft paws. Soft paws are rubber cups that fit over each individual claw. The disadvantage to these is that cats cannot fully retract their claws, however this is a much more humane solution to scratching than to have your cat declawed. However, we recommend allowing your cat to scratch appropriate objects. Remember that scratching is a very natural, normal behavior in cats.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado. ©2000 Dumb Friends League and ©2003 The HSUS. All rights reserved.