

The Scratch Stops Here

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Cats scratch; it's a fact. Cats don't scratch to be destructive, but rather because it's a natural activity. The common misconception is that cats scratch on surfaces in order to sharpen their claws. However, cats scratch for multiple reasons, none of which include intentionally making their claws sharp. We can help you figure out why your cat scratches, and hopefully help you figure out a more appropriate scratching solution!

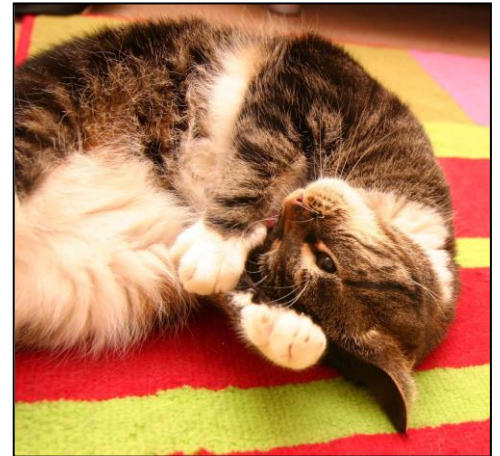
Why Cats Scratch

Shedding Sheaths

One reason cats scratch is to remove the shedding sheaths on their claws. Cats' claws grow just like human fingernails, and as they grow, the outer layer must come off, akin to a snake shedding its skin. Until the sheath comes off, it can irritate a cat's paws around the base of the claws. Removing the sheath more quickly is one reason cats scratch.

Scent Marking

Cats also scratch in order to leave their scent on a surface. Cats have scent glands in their paws and scratching leaves that scent as a marker. Cats generally do this sort of scratching in areas where they feel happy or content, such as near a particularly favored sleeping area.



Play

Cats also scratch during play. When cats get excited and happy, as in during a vigorous play session, they may feel the sudden urge to do some scratching, perhaps on the closest rug.

It Feels Good!

Sometimes cats scratch simply because it feels good! Scratching stretches the shoulder and back, gets any irritating sheaths off of the claws and leaves behind a happy scent. Since scratching feels good and is a normal feline behavior, most cats are very motivated to scratch. As a result, it then becomes our job as pet owners to give them good direction about what is appropriate to scratch!

While those facing the problem of inappropriate scratching might not feel very positive about this behavior, it's helpful to know that this is not an insurmountable problem. You can help teach your cat where you would like her to scratch and still have it be the enjoyable experience she seeks.

Scratching Post Factors

Location, Location, Location

When faced with the problem of inappropriate scratching, it's important to consider the location of your cat's scratching post. Unimportant as location may seem to you, cats beg to differ! Scratching post location can be critical to a cat's sense of well-being. This is because cats love to scent mark when they're happy. It tells the world that this is her territory and that within this territory, life is good. Without the ability to share this message appropriately, a cat will scratch the next best thing in her territory, perhaps a couch or some drapes.

Anyone living with a cat will have noticed her rubbing up against things (people included) when she is content. This is another form of scent marking that sends the same kind of message. When a cat's scratching post is located away from the human's center of activity, the cat is unable to "communicate" that she is feeling content and happy in that area. Instead, she may choose to leave her scent on the things closest to her caretakers, most notably where they seem to spend the most time – for example, living room furniture.

Quite frequently, however, just moving your cat's scratching post (or adding a second post) to the area where humans tend to congregate will eliminate the inappropriate scratching altogether. It's important to also provide positive reinforcement to encourage your cat's use of the newly relocated post – praise, petting and treats when she scratches the post are all good choices.

The Texture of Life

Another consideration is the texture (or surface) of the scratching post. Some cats just don't like to scratch on the carpeted posts that are so common in most cat households, and simply switching to a different texture might eliminate inappropriate scratching.

It might be necessary to experiment a bit to see what your cat likes. Some cats like wood, some like cardboard, and some insist on sisal fiber. Still, others like a combination of two or more textures. Look at the textures your cat currently likes to scratch for clues on the types of surfaces she prefers. If your cat is using the couch, a carpeted post might be a good substitute. If she claws wood or wicker furniture, you may want to try wood and sisal posts. If she's shredding paper, try a cardboard scratcher.



Up, Down, All Around

If finding the correct surface didn't solve the problem, consider that many cats have strong preferences regarding scratching post incline as well. Some cats only like to scratch things placed flat on the ground (horizontal), while others like them as vertical as possible. Of course, there are also those that will only use something in between the two extremes.

Again, experiment to see what your cat enjoys best. A good indication as to your cat's preferences regarding orientation lies in your home. Again, look at what your cat scratches now. If it's along the top of a sofa or on the carpet, she will most likely enjoy flat/horizontal scratching surfaces. If it's up higher, such as on the arms of a chair or on drapes, a vertical post will probably be most suitable. If your cat does both, try a blend of the two in a sloped scratching post.

Finding the "right" scratching post with both a texture and orientation your cat likes and then placing it in the location your cat enjoys most can take some time and detective work. However, when you consider the amount of personal property you may save from destruction, the effort is certainly worth it!

Upping the Ante

Upping the stakes by using catnip or a pheromone-based product called Feliway may also speed up the process of getting your cat to use the appropriate scratching equipment. If your cat likes catnip (not all cats do), it may entice your cat to use the post more quickly and more frequently.

Feliway comes in small spray bottles and simulates the “happy pheromones” released from a cat’s cheek and paw glands when she scratches or rubs up against items in your home. Spraying Feliway on the surfaces where you don’t want your cat to scratch makes her think these areas have already been marked. This way she will feel more relaxed about not putting her scent in the same place. When she smells the Feliway, she will think, “Oh – I’ve already done that area” and move on to her scratching post.

Kudos to Kitty

Regardless of the type or texture of scratching equipment your cat prefers, positive reinforcement is the way to get your cat to use her scratcher consistently and willingly.

We recommend using food treats. It’s always best to do your training sessions around meal times so your cat is hungry and interested. While working on a training program with your cat, if you free feed (leave food out all the time), it’s a good idea to put your cat on a set feeding schedule. This will provide a built-in training schedule that helps both you and your cat reach training goals faster.



How Do I Do This?

Your cat should be rewarded with attention or a treat whenever she goes near the scratching post, even if she’s just walking by. You can use some canned cat food or tuna on a spoon, bits of cooked chicken, or a commercially produced treat. Just be sure the treat is a tiny amount, no bigger than a pea. It’s easier to reward your cat if you “mark” the behavior with a sound like a clicker or a word such as “Yep!” to let your cat know what she has done right.

Next, encourage your cat to place her paws on the post, but never force her to. You can use your treat to lure her paws to touch the post – as soon as her paws touch the post is when she gets rewarded! It usually does not take long before your cat will scratch the surface just because her paws are there and it leads to rewards. Soon your cat will do this automatically; this is the time to reward generously with lots of praise so she continues to offer the behavior!

Keep your training sessions short (two or three minutes is long enough). Always end on a positive note – the end of a training session is a great time to feed your cat her breakfast or dinner. If you can do two sessions per day, it will make retraining faster. Remember that the secret to training cats is to be prepared at any moment to catch your cat doing the *right* thing and reward her when she does! Use your training sessions to set the pattern of reinforcing good behavior, but be ready to reward and praise your cat when she does it any other time, even outside of formal training sessions.

Slip Sliding Away

While you are retraining your cat, she may backslide on occasion. It’s important that you prevent the behavior as much as possible until your cat understands what you want from her. One of the simplest ways to prevent your cat from scratching your furniture and other surfaces is to place some wide, double-sided tape (two-sided carpet tape can be found at the bigger home and hardware stores) on the areas that your cat likes to scratch. Since cats dislike sticky surfaces, they won’t want to touch these strips of tape, preventing scratching in these established places.



You may also want to look into a product called Soft Paws. Soft Paws are flexible plastic caps that cover each cat claw completely. This prevents damage to your furniture while you retrain. One caveat – if your cat doesn't care for having her feet handled or having her claws clipped, it will be difficult to put Soft Paws on each of her front 10 claws!

Yikes – She's Doing It Again!

What should you do when you catch your cat scratching in an inappropriate place? Many people resort to squirt bottles, yelling and throwing things

like noisemakers at their cats to discourage them from inappropriate behaviors. While these approaches may temporarily startle your cat into stopping the behavior, none teach your cat what you want her to do.

Aversive methods such as the above *will* make your cat suspicious of you whenever she sees you pick up the bottle or can, and may even teach your cat not to scratch such things in your presence. Remember, you must be present for aversive methods to work, so your cat may not scratch when you're looking to avoid the punishment. However, most of these methods are temporary since cats (like many animals) will find the "loopholes" and your cat will just wait until you're not around if she wants to do something badly enough.

Your cat will also quickly learn to associate the punishment with you, which is not good for your relationship with her. In other words, please don't waste your time running around using aversive devices. Instead, take the positive approach and teach your cat what you *do* want, and reward her for that!

Nail Trimming

Keeping your cat's nails trimmed will minimize inappropriate scratching and protect your skin. This can be an ordeal or, when handled properly, a painless and uneventful routine in your cat's life. It's important that your cat has a gentle and pleasant experience during nail trimming. This means that your cat should be comfortable being handled and lightly restrained. Be sure that you work on that first if your cat isn't comfortable with having her feet touched.

Use really great food treats and start by just stroking her feet and then giving her a tiny food treat for each stroke. Increase the amount of restraint slowly until you can hold your cat between your body and your arm. You will need to make this a positive experience by doing lots of repetitions with the food treats. After you're able to handle your cat's paws, you will then need to apply a small amount of pressure to the cat's paw to extend the claw. You do this by pressing your thumb on top of the paw with your index finger, under the pad of that nail. You will apply light pressure until the claw is extended.

You should now be able to see the pink area of the claw. Be sure to avoid cutting into this pink area! This is very sensitive – it will hurt your cat and cause her to bleed if you cut too high up. The goal is to cut just the sharp point from the end of the claw to prevent damage to furniture and skin.

Nail trimmers come in a variety of sizes and shapes, but you can also use regular human fingernail clippers to trim your cat's nails. If you use fingernail clippers, it's important to turn it sideways to the claw so you don't crush the end of it. Crushing the claw during trimming can actually cause your cat to scratch more because she will attempt to remove the ragged edges.



If you're not sure about trimming your cat's nails, please do ask your veterinarian or a groomer to show you how to do it before you try it yourself.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are many ways to reduce the damage that your cat's claws may cause, while increasing her happiness and contentment. When in doubt, remember to look at where and what she scratches and take your clues from there. And of course, if you continue to have problems, always feel free to call the Behavior Trainers at San Diego Humane Society for some additional problem-solving and advice!

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.