

Inappropriate Scratching in Cats

Why do cats scratch?

Scratching is a normal behavior that aids cats in the marking of their territories in the form of scratch marks. Scent glands in their paws leave olfactory clues for other cats to alert them to their presence. Cats also find it pleasurable as a means of exercise and stretching. Scratching also allows cats to keep their claws healthy and shortened. Unlike dogs, a cats' claws do not exfoliate evenly from the end; rather they peel off in layers like an onion.

What is inappropriate scratching?

Inappropriate scratching is ultimately determined by the owner, but is generally directed at furniture, screens, carpets and rugs and other items that the cats finds suitable.

What can I do to prevent this?

The easiest way to prevent severe damage is to trim your cats nails every 2-4 weeks. It is best to begin this process when the cat is very young, as they will become more accustomed to this procedure. However, older cats can learn to tolerate it as well.

Another excellent method is to provide them with a suitable scratching substrate. As with nail trimming, this is also best started at an early age before the scratching behavior begins, but older cats will also generally accept such items as carpet or sisal fiber scratching posts or corrugated cardboard. For more options, you can visit your local pet store or make your own from their preferred scratching material and a supporting board of wood.

My cat is ignoring the scratching post. How do I get him/her to use it?

Place the item in the areas that your cat(s) enjoys scratching. You can entice the cat to use the item by rubbing or sprinkling with catnip. If your cat insists on using the wrong scratching surface, guide your cat to the correct site. Once at the post, you can start petting and scratching your cat while placing their feet on the surface for encouragement and stimulation of the natural kneading motion. Remember to reward your cat for its good behavior!

My cat still enjoys his/her favorite areas. How do I get him/her to stop?

Ideally you would prevent access to that area by covering the area with things unpleasant to your cat such as double-sided tape, aluminum foil, or double-sided sticky tape. Cats also tend to have aversions to certain odors like citrus, so use of a lemon-scented spray can deter your cat and leave your home smelling fresh. If you catch your cat in the act, you can also calmly, and with no fanfare, bring the cat to the preferred post and reward lavishly there. If that is not possible, try to use remote punishment not associated with you to distract your cat. One option is to spray with a direct stream of water. Direct punishment, such as by you telling them "no", will result in your cat not scratching when you are present, but does not stop them from scratching when you are gone.

A recent development in cat behavior is a product called Feliway®. This is a feline facial pheromone that works on the premise that it will decrease your cats' need to mark, but instead mark with its cheek. It has been used for urine marking specifically, but can be tried for claw marking. For more information this, talk with your veterinarian.

What if my training efforts have proven ineffective?

If your cat remains resistant to changing the locale of their scratching, a way to prevent more damage to your belongings is to apply nail covers such as Soft Paws®. Soft Paws® are lightweight vinyl caps that cover your cats' claws. They can be applied by yourself at home, or if you're more comfortable you can have your veterinarian apply them for you. They need to be checked weekly and replaced as necessary. Also, please remember that if your cat wears them they should not be allowed to go outdoors for safety reasons.

I've heard about declawing, is this an option?

If all other alternatives have been exhausted, declawing is an option. If you are contemplating this decision, please discuss your surgical options with your veterinarian so they can explain all that the procedure entails, possible complications, as well as new advances in pain management.

*Handout created as part of a class exercise by veterinary students:
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