

Managing Scratching Behavior in Cats

Understanding why cats scratch

Cats scratch for a variety of reasons: to maintain the health of their nails, to stretch out the muscles in their shoulders and back, to mark their territory around other cats, and to serve as an emotional outlet (scratching after being startled, frustrated, or relieved at the owner returning home). Cats need to scratch just as puppies need to chew, so the owner's goal is not to eliminate the behavior but to manage it in the safest and least destructive way possible.

Redirecting Scratching Behavior

Provide the right scratching post

Pam Johnson-Bennett, author of "Think Like a Cat," provides three rules for a scratching post. It must be covered in the right material, sturdy and well-constructed, and tall enough for a full stretch. Bennett recommends a post covered in sisal, rope, or any rough texture. Carpet is OK only if the material is rough enough. The post must be sturdy enough that the cat cannot tip it, so we recommend cat trees (tall posts with multiple perching levels) that allow the cat to adequately stretch its back muscles. Some cats prefer horizontal scratching surfaces to vertical ones, and major pet supply stores carry such products in their cat section.

Placing the post

Keep the post plainly visible; do not hide it in the spare bedroom! If the post is for a kitten, put it in the middle of his room where he can't miss it. You want the post to be accessible to the cat when you come home, after he's awoken from a nap and after he's eaten. This won't happen if he can't find it.

Introducing your cat to the post

Make the process of introducing your cat to the post a game. Dangle a cat-teaser near or over the post and wait for him to put his claws on it. If he shows no interest, turn the post on its side and keep playing. If you choose, you can gently run your fingernails over the post but do not put the cat's paws on it: he won't understand what you're doing and may learn to dislike the post. Once he discovers the texture and begins scratching, praise him for using it. If he's food motivated, you can offer him a small treat.

Replacing a used post

When your cat's current post is falling apart/shredded/looks awful and you decide to get a new one, simply put it alongside the old post. If you remove the old one altogether, your cat may not use the new one at all. The old one was really his, with his own marks and scent. Remember that scratching is not just for marking and nail-maintenance, but serves as an emotional outlet as well. If he really and truly abandons the old post for the new one, you can get rid of it.

Don't punish scratching

Scratching is a normal behavior and shouldn't be reprimanded. Focus instead on redirecting your cat back to his post with the game described above. Some people recommend remote punishing devices, like attaching inflated balloons to the furniture (so that they will pop when scratched and deter future scratching), but we don't recommend this. Many cats find it too frightening, and the noise may punish other cats in the household who are doing nothing wrong.

Other ways to deter scratching

Make your furniture unappealing to the cat

Double-sided tape can leave a residue on furniture, so we recommend instead a product called Sticky Paws, a water-soluble adhesive applied like tape. Apply this to areas your cat has already been scratching. If your cat has been using the entire piece of furniture, cover it with a sheet (taping the bottom so he can't climb up underneath it) and apply Sticky Paws or double-sided tape at various spots. Place his post right next to the furniture. When your cat has been routinely using the post instead of the furniture, gradually move it (an inch

each day) to where you want it permanently located, remembering that it should still be highly visible. When the cat appears to go right for his post without paying attention to the furniture, take the sheet off.

Trim claws regularly

Well-trimmed claws don't do as much damage, so have your vet or groomer show you how to trim them.

Soft Paws

You might also consider Soft Paws, little plastic caps that can be glued to your cat's nails. The cat will still attempt to scratch, but the caps will prevent damage to your furniture. The caps typically last one to two months: any that have not fallen off or been chewed off by the cat will have to be removed as the cat's nails grow. This option is best for owners who are unable to train their cats to a post but do not want to declaw them.