

Destructive Scratching

The Cat and Her Nails

Scratching is a natural and pleasurable feline behavior. Cats scratch to remove the outer part of their nails that become frayed, to mark their territory with the scent gland located on their feet and to stretch. Nails allow cats to establish footing while walking, jumping and running. Because this is such a natural behavior, it is unrealistic to train a cat not to scratch. It is realistic, however, to train a cat to scratch an appropriate object/area that is acceptable to both of you.

Regularly trim your cat's nails. Properly trimmed nails will reduce damage to any area that the cat may scratch. Using a nail clipper designed specifically for cat nails (you can purchase these clippers at any pet supply store), trim the curved part of nail before the pink quick. Give treats for calm behavior during and after the nail trimming to make it a more positive experience for you and your cat. If you are unsure about how to cut your cat's nails, ask your vet or other cat care professional to demonstrate for you at your next visit.

Finding The Right Scratching Post

It is very important to determine your cat's scratching surface preference. To do so, you must find your cat's preference to the following answers:

- ✓ Location: In what area of the house does your cat prefer to scratch? Is it a high traffic area, a quiet area, near windows, etc?
- ✓ Texture: What kind of texture does your cat prefer? The most common choices are carpet, sisal rope or corrugated cardboard. If your cat is scratching something now, take a good look at what the type of surface is and get something that resembles the currently used spot.
- ✓ Orientation: Is your cat a vertical or horizontal scratcher?
- ✓ Height or Length: How far does your cat stretch when it is scratching? For vertical scratchers you will need at least 3' in height with a wide base for support.

How Do I Train My Cat To Scratch The New, Approved Scratching Post/Area?

Scratching posts paired with positive reinforcement training when the cat uses the new, approved scratching post/area is often a successful compromise between you, your cat and the furniture. Place the new, approved scratching post/area near the old, forbidden area. Rub some catnip on the new, approved scratching post, feed the cat near the post or play with your cat in that area to help foster a positive association between your cat and the new, approved scratching post/area. Once the cat is reliably using the new, approved scratching post/area move it a few inches every day to the spot you prefer it to remain permanently. Moving it too quickly can result in the cat returning to the old, forbidden scratching area or finding another forbidden area to scratch.

At the same time you are training your cat to scratch the agreed upon post/area, you can make forbidden areas unattractive by placing aversives such as carpet runners with the pointy sides up on or around the area. Products such as Sticky Paws (double-sided sticky tape), which you can purchase at any pet supply store, can be applied to the forbidden area which will result in an unpleasant feeling should the cat place its paws on the sticky area. You



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can also place citrus scents on the forbidden area, but don't apply too much – this can saturate the surrounding areas, including where the appropriate scratching post/area is initially located.

After the cat is reliably using the new, approved scratching post/area in its permanent location, and is consistently avoiding the old, forbidden areas, you may gradually remove the aversives (carpet runners, Sticky Paws, etc) that you applied to the old, forbidden scratching area. If your cat at any time returns to the old, forbidden area reapply the aversives.

Why Punishment Doesn't Solve the Problem

DO NOT PUNISH your cat by hitting, yelling, etc for scratching a forbidden area. This may cause your cat to begin fearing you and your hands, which should be pleasant things for your cat. This may stop the scratching at that moment, but your cat may simply learn that it is only safe to scratch the forbidden area when you are not around. Never yell at your cat or discipline her with your hands. This can send confusing signals since your cat cannot determine when your hands are safe (calm petting, food time) vs. when they are not (hitting, restraining). Your cat can learn to avoid you if, in their perspective, your hands are unpredictable.

If you catch your cat in the act of scratching a forbidden area, you may say "hey!" in a loud (not yelling), firm voice to interrupt the scratching. If your cat is comfortable being handled, you may pick up your cat and take her to the new, approved scratching area and rewarding her for scratching there instead.

My Cat Doesn't Scratch the Furniture - She Scratches Me!

To prevent your cat from scratching you it is important that you do not encourage any playtime that includes human hands, feet, etc. as targets. If teeth ever touch skin, all play and attention stop immediately. Simply walk away from your cat and ignore her for a few minutes before giving any more attention.

If your cat is on your lap, simply stand up and allow your cat to slide off your lap and walk away. Your cat soon will learn that if teeth or nails touch skin the fun time with mom and dad ends – which is no fun at all! Provide appropriate play toys such as catnip filled-fabric mice, fishing pole toys or treat balls.

Other Alternatives

Soft Paws are plastic nail caps that can be applied to your cat's nails. Your cat can still scratch any area, but will do no damage, or limited damage, since the nail caps are smooth plastic. You can get them in various colors from natural to feisty feline red! These do fall off as the nail grows and need to be replaced on a regular basis. For more information on this product visit the manufacturer's website at www.softpaws.com.

Feliway is a feline pheromone product that can be used to help stop destructive scratching. You spray Feliway on the forbidden objects. This product decreases the cat's need to "mark" the area with their scent (pheromone) glands since it is already "marked" with the Feliway.

Declawing is a sensitive and emotional issue for all cat lovers – no matter what your opinion. We encourage every cat owner to educate themselves about the facts about declawing and the alternatives to this procedure before



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making the decision to declaw or not to declaw your feline companion. More information is available on the *To Declaw or Not To Declaw – That Is The Question* information page.

“I Have More Questions...”

If you have additional questions about this subject, please contact Purrfect Paws Animal Behavior Center, LLC at 716-465-6555 for additional help to resolve this issue.