

Scratching Behavior

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One of the most common complaints about pet cats is their scratching behavior – whether they are scratching inappropriate items (walls, furniture, carpet) or people. It is important to understand that scratching is a very normal behavior for cats.

There are usually two reasons for scratching behavior. The first is to remove the sheaths that cover the nails. The second is to mark territory. Both behaviors are natural and instinctive for cats. Look at it this way, we are asking cats to live in our world, where we don't find these behaviors desirable – especially when they hurt (scratching us) or cause damage (scratching belongings).

One way to address the urge to scratch is to provide appropriate things your cat can scratch. Any pet supply store will have many different types of scratching toys for cats. Scratching toys come in quite a few varieties, both in surface (what they are covered with) and position (how they are used). You might want to try several types until you find your cat's desired type. You may find that keeping an array of different surfaces, locations, and angles will keep your cat more engaged with scratching what you deem to be appropriate, and away from what you deem to be inappropriate.

If you notice your cat is returning to the same areas to scratch, make sure to place some of these items in those locations. Some cats like to be able to scratch at a height (reaching up, stretching and scratching), while others prefer their scratching to be horizontal (on the ground).

Some cats prefer a certain surface – while others are happy with a sampling of different feels. You can find scratching toys that are covered in carpet-like surfaces, others will have a sisal covering, and some will even have a corrugated surface (much like a cardboard box). Don't rule out using an empty cardboard box. Many cats love to climb in and out of an empty box, and if they scratch it while doing so, nothing of value is being damaged. Another inexpensive/free scratching toy is an actual tree branch or log from outdoors.

Some of the toys can be hung on a door knob (if your cat likes to scratch the door or near the door. Some toys even have the option of adding catnip to them to further entice a cat to use them.

In addition to toys specific to scratching, make sure your cat has plenty of things to do. When animals get bored, they will find something to occupy themselves, and often it is something we don't want them to do. Cats like to climb. A cat tree that enables your cat to climb to a higher level is a great thing to have. They come in so many different types – some look like real tree, others look like kitty condos. Some are covered in a carpet – or the posts are covered with sisal, both of which might be attractive to your cat to satisfy the scratching urge.

Other toys that make your cat expend energy – balls, toy mice, laser toys, windup toys they can chase – all provide an outlet for doing what comes naturally to them. It satisfies the urge to "hunt". After all, cats are hunters, and in today's world, they don't have to hunt for survival. Just because they don't have to, doesn't mean they don't have the desire. These types of toys satisfy that urge. By providing this type of play experience, your cat will be more "played-out"/tired, and less likely to engage in undesirable behavior (scratching).

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In addition to providing appropriate items for your cat to scratch, there are some things you can do to discourage scratching. For furniture and other surfaces, you can use double sided tape. Cats don't usually like the way the tape feels on their feet. Because the underside is also sticky, you can use it in a variety of places. Another deterrent is to place a layer of aluminum foil over the area your cat is scratching. Again, they usually don't like it, and will usually avoid it.

If you catch your cat "in the act" of scratching, you can use a "shake" can. This is very easy (and inexpensive) to make. Take an empty can (such as a soda can). Drop pennies or pebbles in the can. Tape the open end closed to the pennies or pebbles can't fall out. When you see your cat scratching, shake the can. The loud noise should startle them and move them along from what they were doing. Another "tool" you can use is a squirt bottle. This is similar in theory to the shake can. Take a squirt bottle (easily found at the dollar store) and fill it with water. When you catch your cat scratching – squirt with the bottle. Again, you want to interrupt the behavior – not harm or antagonize your cat.

There are several products available that may also aid in addressing the inappropriate scratching. One is by using a citrus scented spray near the area of inappropriate scratching. Cats usually don't care for the smell of citrus, and therefore should avoid it. Another product is a plug-in called Feliway. The substance in the plug-in replicates "happy"/friendly/calming pheromones. The concept is to make the cat feel more settled. The plug-ins can be placed in the areas most frequented by your cat. It also comes in spray form that can be sprayed directly onto bedding or on a towel to cover a carrier (for a trip to the vet). What is nice about this product is that humans don't usually notice (smell) it. Check your local pet supply store for these items.

If your cat is exhibiting good/desirable behavior, by all means reward that behavior. If you find your cat using one of the appropriate items you have provided for scratching, reward with something your cat likes/finds valuable. There are many different types of treats available. If your cat is picky, perhaps a small piece of lunchmeat, tuna or cheese will do. Whatever it is (as long as it isn't harmful to your cat, of course), as long as it will be considered a reward, should work.

Keeping your cat's claws trimmed can also help to curb the scratching behavior. If you are unfamiliar with how to trim your cat's nails, ask your veterinarian to show you how. It is fairly easy to do – but if your cat is uncooperative, it can be more challenging. Most groomers will trim nails for a nominal fee. Many find it to be well worth the cost to have someone else do it. Many groomers don't even require an appointment for this.

Another option is claw covers. These are the "nail tips" of the cat world. They are also sold in pet stores (your vet and local groomer probably have them, too) and can be applied over your cat's nails. They come in many colors – so you can even choose a masculine color for your male! They definitely make a fashion statement.

At the end of the day, cats like to scratch. Providing appropriate outlets for the scratching could make the difference between a harmonious relationship between you and your cat or a frustrating one. You will both be happier if it is harmonious!