

## **Controlling Scratching and Clawing of Cats**

"Our cat is destroying everything in the house with her claws!" is one of the most common complaints from people who live with cats.

Scratching is a natural behavior for cats, but it can be both annoying and destructive. Luckily, this behavior can also be modified humanely and effectively.

### **Why cats scratch:**

Like their wild ancestors, domestic cats use their claws for a variety of reasons. In some cases, scratching is a territorial behavior, with cats marking objects in their territory. Cats' claws are also their first lines of defense against attack from other animals. By just extending their claws, cats can send a subtle warning message to "back-off" before more force is needed.

Mostly, cats scratch because it feels good to them. Using their claws is part of their normal exercise pattern. While kneading and stretching, they both strengthen and relax the muscles of the feet, forelegs, backbone, and shoulders.

### **Finding good solutions for everyone :**

Obviously, declawing is not a humane alternative (see The Problems with Declawed Cats), but cat owners need not resign themselves to shredded furniture and carpets. Most people find they can meet their cats' natural clawing needs by supplying a scratching post that cats find irresistible.

### **Choosing a post:**

A post should be sturdy so it won't tip or fall while the cat is scratching. It should be at least three feet tall to allow the cat a full stretch. Most important is the surface of the post. Unfortunately, many commercially available posts are covered with the least appropriate materials such as carpet or upholstery fabric; exactly the kinds of common household surface cats should avoid.

The best posts offer resistance and allow cats to really dig with their claws. They can be covered with the backside of carpet, thick burlap, or a durable hemp-like material called sisal that appeals to most cats. Many pet supply stores and mail order catalogs now offer custom-made posts. One of the most popular is the Felix Cat Tree, available from The Felix Company.

If space allows, provide more than one post, especially in a multi-cat household. The best place to put a post is near the cat's favorite snoozing spot. Cats most like to stretch and scratch as they awaken from a nap, and often after they eat or play.

### **How to convert your cat to a confirmed post-scratchier:**

Contrary to popular thinking, cats can be taught new behaviors. They will learn to use the post through positive reinforcement, with some deterrence if necessary.

Make the post irresistible by sprinkling or spraying catnip on it. Tie a favorite toy to the post. Center the cat's playtime on the post, and make time spent there fun. Do not do anything that may startle the cat when she is in the vicinity of the post. Praise your cat lavishly each time she uses the post. If you see the cat eyeing furniture or carpet, calmly take her to the post, and praise her when she begins to scratch there. If you catch your cat in the act of scratching on the wrong place, do not punish her. Instead, try to distract her with a loud noise or water from a squirt gun or bottle. This will stop her mid-scratch so you can take her to the post immediately. Again, praise her for using the post instead.

It may take a while before you can trust the cat not to claw furniture while you are away or asleep. To reinforce your lessons, deny the cat access to forbidden surfaces and make them less attractive. Cover furniture with a material cat's do not like (foil heavy plastic, sheets of paper with double-sided tape on them), or put the cat in a secure area of the house with no furniture or carpet. If you do confine the cat, even for short periods, be sure to provide a litterbox, water, toys, and a scratching post so she will be accustomed to using it in your absence.

### **Clipping cat's nails:**

1. Hold the paw firmly with the claw extended. For best results, use a clipper designed for cats. If you don't have one, you can use regular nail trimmers as long as they are sharp. Trim off the curved end of the claw. Do not clip into the pink area where the veins are located, or you will hurt the cat. Do this for each claw, including the dewclaws on the sides of the front paws.
2. If the cat complains as you clip the claw, make sure you are not trimming too closely. Talk to her softly as you go, and praise or reward her with a treat when you finish.

Note:

Polydactyl cats (cats with extra toes) are often unable to retract their claws and need to have their extra toes clipped to prevent them from growing into the flesh.