



## PENINSULA HUMANE SOCIETY

Advocating quality and compassion for all life

# CATS WILL BE CATS: SOLVING COMMON PROBLEMS

## Whose Problem?

If your cat is attacking you, your furniture, phantom spirits and invisible mice; if she's bouncing off the walls and ceiling; knocking things off counter tops; stealing, carrying around, or hiding the most unusual objects; don't worry, your cat is quite normal. Much of this obnoxious behavior is instinctive, natural play and predatory activity. This frequently happens with lonely, bored cats who have an excess of energy and nowhere for that energy to go. They cannot chase real mice and birds, or climb trees, so they develop other habits to entertain themselves.

## Treatment

Many of these problems can be prevented or cured by providing games, exercise, and entertainment for your kitty. Get on the floor and play with her. Don't just toss her a toy and expect her to play by herself. Tie a toy to the end of a string, toss it down the hall and reel it in, or slowly drag it across the floor. This gives kitty a moving target to chase and attack. Put a bird feeder outside a window so your cat can watch hummingbirds dive-bomb the fuschia bush. (See Training pamphlet for more ideas.)

Sometimes kitten behavior, such as sucking and kneading, continues into adulthood. Provide your cat with something safe of his own towards which he can direct this behavior. If the cat decides to use you or your clothing for this activity, let out a short high-pitched yelp to let him know you disapprove. Teach him "yes" by encouraging kitty to indulge himself with his own special sucking/kneading pillow or blanket.

Often a cat's misbehavior is actually reinforced by your unintentional rewards. The cat suddenly runs up, nips you on the ankle, and runs off. You scream and chase him. Although you think you are reprimanding the cat, he probably thinks this is a fun game. All is dull and quiet, and kitty has learned a trick to spark up some action. Cats can also become pests, demanding attention and affection because when they come over to bug you, you give them what they want -- food, attention, affection.

## Furniture-Scratching

A cat has retractile claws so that they can be kept sharp for hunting, fishing, and climbing. Nonetheless, a cat needs to periodically condition his claws. Claws on the forepaws are primarily conditioned by scratching, which removes old layers of the nail. Cats keep their hind claws trim by chewing off the worn parts. Scratching is also a form of marking behavior.

## Treatment

Cats need their claws for protection. You may know that your indoor cat will never have to climb a tree in order to escape from the neighbor's Chihuahua, but your cat doesn't know it. Declawing makes cats feel insecure and defenseless. It seems a little radical to cut off so many parts of his body to prevent such a simple behavior problem. In addition, declawing destroys one of the cat's most enjoyable activities -- climbing. It is natural for cats to scratch; and it is unfair and inhumane to punish a cat for acting like a cat. The major aim of these exercises is to redirect the cat's normal scratching behavior to an appropriate object -- a scratching/climbing post.



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### **Prevention**

One good scratching session can ruin an armchair and cost you hundreds of dollars. Until the cat can be trusted not to scratch and claw at household furniture, he should not be allowed free run of the house. Alternatively, if the cat has a single favorite scratching site, this may be protected temporarily by covering it with some net or loosely woven fabric such as tulle. Cats do not like to snag their claws.

### **Setting up for Success**

Your cat needs to scratch and climb. These activities are part of the essence of being a cat. It is possible to teach the cat to limit his scratching to objects provided specifically for that purpose. Provide your cat with a variety of scratching posts. Most cats scratch immediately after waking, while performing a variety of stretching and calisthenics exercises. So place a scratching post close to each of his favorite sleeping areas.

You can buy a post at a pet supply store, or you can build one yourself. Cats do not require expensive climbing paraphernalia. Rough-hewn 4x4s set vertically or at about a 45-degree angle are very appealing to many cats. Whether buying carpet to cover homemade posts or purchasing the finished article, take along a comb to check that there are no loops in the carpeting which will snag the cat's claws. You can also attach the carpeting underside-up, as the backing has a rough texture that cats like. A bark-covered log or a straw mat makes a good horizontal scratching post.

Minimize damage to furniture by trimming your cat's claws regularly. The pamphlet on Declawing shows you how to clip your cat's nails (instead of removing them permanently).

### **Rewards**

In addition to providing the posts, take time to teach your cat that these objects are intended as the sole site for his scratching and climbing activities. As soon as he wakes from a nap, call him to his post. Scratch the post at a point a few feet off the floor. Your cat will probably reach up and stretch his front paws on the post. Praise him profusely, especially if he makes scratching motions. Make the post enjoyable for him. Put an occasional food treat on it. Don't try to physically force him to scratch by holding his paws; he will probably resist and even dislike the post. A quick and effective method of teaching the cat to use his post is through lures and rewards,

You can even train your cat to climb his post on command. Stand by the post with a treat in hand. Give a command (request) such as "Kitty, climb," or "Up, up and away!" Give him the treat if he comes running. If he walks in a slovenly fashion, or remains aloof and recumbent elsewhere, wait until he is a little hungrier, and repeat the procedure. Once he shows interest in coming over to the post, give the command again and place another treat on the lowest platform. The next time, place the treat on a high platform, and so on. You will see how smart cats are and how quickly they learn before your very eyes.

### **Boobytraps**

Once the cat clearly understands that you are overcome with joy when he claws or climbs his posts, you can show him that scratching your furniture and drapes is wrong. You must teach what is right before teaching what is wrong.

A simple way to discourage your cat is to boobytrap forbidden articles. The pamphlet on boobytraps describes a variety of ways to make furniture-scratching unenjoyable to your cat.

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