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Feline Scratching

Why do cat's scratch?

Scratching is a normal feline behavior. Scratching serves to shorten and remove the outer dead layer of the claw, mark territory with both visual and scent cues and it allows the cat to stretch.

How can I stop my cat from scratching?

It is impractical and unfair to expect cats to stop scratching entirely. Cats will need some outlet for their scratching behavior. Even though it is not possible to stop a cat from scratching, it is possible to direct the scratching, climbing, and play behaviors to appropriate areas indoors. Providing a scratching post, appropriate play toys, and making potential problem areas undesirable will usually be adequate to deal with most scratching problems.

How do I design a scratching area for my cat?

Design your post by using your cat's point of view. If your cat is already scratching an inappropriate item, observe where the item is located, what kind of material covers the item, whether it is horizontal or vertical and the height of the scratch marks. Try to mimic as many of these things as possible when designing the post. Place the post near the inappropriate item already being used.

If you are just bringing the cat home, posts should be set up in prominent areas, with at least one close to the cat's sleeping quarters. The post should be tall enough for the cat to scratch while standing on hind legs with the forelegs extended. The post should also be sturdy enough so that it does not topple when the cat scratches on it. Some cats prefer a scratching post with a corner so that two sides can be scratched at once while other cats may prefer a horizontal scratching post.

Special consideration should be given to the surface texture of the post. Commercial posts are often covered with tightly woven material for durability, but many cats prefer a loosely woven material where the claws can hook and tear during scratching. Remember, scratching is also a territory marking behavior and cats want to leave a visual mark. Carpet may be an acceptable covering but it should be combed first to make certain that there are no tight loops. Some cats prefer sisal, a piece of material from an old chair, or even bare wood for scratching. Be certain to use a material that appeals to your cat.

How can I get my cat to use its post?

A good way to get the cat to approach and use the post is to turn the scratching area into an interesting and desirable play center. Perches to climb on, space to climb into, and toys mounted on ropes or springs are highly appealing to most cats. Placing a few play toys, cardboard boxes, catnip treats, or even the food bowl in the area should help to keep the cat occupied. Sometimes rubbing the post with tuna oil will increase its attractiveness. Food rewards can also be given if the owner observes the cat scratching at its post. Products have been designed to reward the cat automatically by dispensing food rewards each time the cat scratches.

Placement is important when trying to entice your cat to use a scratching post. Because scratching is also a marking behavior, most cats prefer to use a post that is placed in a prominent location. It may be necessary to place the post in the center of a room or near furniture that the cat was trying to scratch until the cat reliably uses the post. You can gradually move the post to your desired location (no more than three inches a day) only when your cat is using the post consistently and exclusively. For some cats, multiple posts in several locations will be necessary.

What can I do if the cat continues to scratch my furniture?

Despite the best of plans and the finest of scratching posts, some cats may continue to scratch or climb in inappropriate areas. At this point a little time, effort, and ingenuity might be necessary. The first thing to consider is partial confinement or “cat proofing” your home when you are not around to supervise until your cat learns where to scratch. If the problem occurs in a few rooms, consider making them out of bounds by closing off a few doors or by using childproofing techniques such as child locks or barricades.

If the cat continues to use one or two pieces of furniture, make sure the scratching post is placed directly in front of the furniture that is being scratched. Take a good look at the surfaces of the scratched furniture and ensure that the surface of the post is covered with a material similar to those for which the cat has shown a preference. Some scratching posts are even designed to be wall mounted or hung on doors. Placing additional scratching posts in strategic areas may also be helpful for some cats. Keeping the cat's nails properly trimmed or using plastic nail covers, are also useful techniques for some owners.

How do I trim my cat's nails?

Begin by petting the cat's feet while giving him a treat, to accustom the cat to having its feet handled. Gradually increase the pressure on each foot by placing your thumb on top of the paw at the base of each toe and your index finger underneath. Gently squeeze. This action should cause the claw to extend. Continue this process until the cat is comfortable with it. Next, carefully clip off only the curved end of the claw. Do not cut the pink portion as this is where the blood vessels are located and it will cause the claw to bleed. It might be helpful to have some quick stop powder available in case you accidentally cut the nail to short. The powder will usually stop the bleeding and is available at most pet stores or vet clinics. If you do not feel comfortable trimming nails, many vets and groomers will do it at a minimal cost.

Keeping your cat's nails trimmed will help prevent his nails from becoming snagged in carpet, fabrics and skin. There are specifically designed clippers for cats available at pet and discount stores. Nails should be trimmed weekly to prevent them from becoming too long.

How do I punish my cat for inappropriate scratching?

All forms of physical punishment should be avoided. They can cause fear or aggression toward the owner, and at best, teach the cat to stop scratching only when the owner is around. If you catch the cat in the act of scratching an inappropriate item, interrupt the behavior with an indirect correction. Long range water rifles, ultrasonic or audible alarms, noise makers like a pop can with pennies or a light object like a pillow thrown at the cat are some examples of indirect corrections. The owner must remain out of sight while administering the correction to be effective.

Generally the best deterrents are those that train the pet not to scratch, even in the owner's absence. If the surface or area can be made unattractive to the cat, then he will seek out a new area or target for scratching. The simplest approach is to cover the scratched surface with a less appealing material like plastic, a loosely draped piece of material, aluminum foil, or double-sided tape. Another effective deterrent is to booby trap problem areas so that either scratching or approaching the area is unpleasant for the cat. Audible motion detectors, a stack of plastic cups that is set to topple, or a pie plate filled with beans or pennies that will tip when the cat scratches are some examples. Of course to be effective, you must provide the cat with an alternative scratching area that is comfortable, appealing, well located, and free of all deterrents.

When should declawing be considered?

We strongly recommend that declawing be used as a last resort. For most households, providing a scratching post and using the techniques discussed above are generally quite successful. If the above methods used to redirect scratching are not working and the cat is in danger of losing his home, then declawing is a permanent solution. For these cases, generally only the front claws need to be removed. We recommend that **ALL** cats stay indoors especially if declawed.