



# Destructive Scratching

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*The first step with any behavioral issue is to take your cat to the veterinarian for a full evaluation. Cats are very stoic animals and will hide illness and injury. Sometimes our only clue that something is physically wrong is a behavioral symptom. Many behavioral modification programs can begin in conjunction with or shortly after your trip to the veterinarian.*

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Scratching is a normal behavior for cats! It serves many purposes, such as marking territory, relieving stress and excess energy, stretching, and removing the dead outer layer of their claws. Cats need to scratch and this should not be taken away from them. Cats that scratch on undesirable objects just need a little guidance as to what is acceptable and beneficial.

## **Choosing a scratching post**

Every cat must have at least one good scratching post; preferably more than one, especially in multi-cat homes. Figuring out which type of scratching post your feline will prefer might take a little bit of trial and error. Most cats like to stretch upwards, so providing a tall cat tower that is at least 3 feet tall with a stable base is always a good idea. Even if the cat doesn't use it to scratch on, it provides a nice perch to survey their surroundings, look out windows, or to provide some solitude when needed.

A proper vertical scratching post needs to suit the needs of an adult-sized cat. A kitten is going to grow quickly, so it's best to get the proper height right from the beginning. The taller the better, but ideally it should be tall enough for an adult cat to stand on the hind legs, and stretch all the way up as far as they can reach. This gives the cat plenty of surface area to work on and a proper stretch. The scratching post needs to be sturdy as well. If it tips or falls over, it may scare the cat, and the cat may never approach it or use it again.

Some cats prefer to scratch horizontally. There are scratch posts that provide this option as well. Again, finding one that won't slide around or tip is very important. Place the scratch board on a carpeted surface or purchase a gripper mat to prevent movement. Texture is important as well. Some cats prefer carpeted posts, some prefer sisal, and some prefer corrugated cardboard. Sisal is the most preferred as it is durable and helps the claws to lose the dead outer layer. Corrugated cardboard will need to be replaced periodically as the scratcher deteriorates from use.

## **Training your cat to use the scratching post**

If you have a multi-cat home, you should have 1 scratch post per cat (or more). Each cat might have a preference of where it is located as well. If there is any conflict between your cats, if you recognize these conflicts re-occurring in the same areas of the home, place a scratch post in those areas. Any of

the cats feeling stressed can have easy access to an instant stress reliever. Scratching posts should be placed in common cat traffic areas and near items that the cat has previously used for scratching. If your cat is scratching on your couch, for example, place the scratch post in front of that particular area.

Sprinkling or spraying catnip onto the tower will attract the cat to the tower. Lure your cat to the scratching post by dangling a favorite toy on the scratcher to encourage exploration and use of the scratcher. Always praise your cat when the scratcher is used even after the training phase is over! Once your cat is consistently using the tower, you can begin to move it a few inches at a time until it is in the location you would like it to be. Be patient and allow the cat time to consistently use it after each move.

If you see the cat about to scratch on an undesirable area, do not frighten the cat or punish the cat. Distract the cat by dangling their favorite toy near them and guide them with the toy to the scratching post. Continue to play with your cat by dangling the toy high up on the scratching post so your cat jumps or stretches to catch it. This will show the cat that the scratching post is stable and feels good to scratch. Interrupting a cat who is already scratching can be done with a distracting toy or an aversive sound. When the cat uses the scratch post, be sure to praise and reward with an extra tasty treat. *See also the articles on Using Aversive Conditioning and Training Your Cat Using Positive Reinforcement.*

### **Alternatives to Declawing**

Declawing is a procedure where a veterinarian amputates the end digit and claw of a cat's paw. Declawing should never be an option unless it is for medical reasons (i.e.: injury). Declawed cats are more likely to suffer from painful arthritis and behavior issues. Declawing a cat also takes away one of its first defenses. This can result in a cat biting more than it might have if it still had its claws. Declawing can also lead to litter box problems, as it can be painful for a cat to rake its paws through the litter. There is a product called Soft Paws that is a wonderful alternative. They are plastic caps that fit right over each claw. A cat can scratch, and there won't be any damage. Groomers and veterinarians can help apply these if you need any help putting them on. The caps can stay on for several weeks before needing to be replaced.

Keeping your cats nails trimmed on a regular basis will also help to prevent you from getting scratched, or the cat getting its nails caught on something, possibly causing damage to the item or to the cat. Clip off the sharp tips every two weeks or so. Work on desensitizing your cat to make this a tolerable interaction. Petting her paws or legs and providing treats at the same time will help the cat to associate the touch as a positive interaction. You can then begin to increase the pressure with gentle squeezes. Eventually you will need to do this to extend the claw in order to trim them. When you extend the claw, you should be able to see the pink or "quick" inside the claw. This is a small blood vessel, and you want to be sure you do NOT cut in that area or it will bleed and be painful. This will help to dull the claw and prevent some damage to furniture or to you.

***If after trying these suggestions you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your cat, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: [www.waysidewaifs.org](http://www.waysidewaifs.org)***

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