



## Managing Scratching Behavior in Cats

Cats scratch for a variety of reasons: to maintain the health of their nails (discarding the dead outer sheath and exposing the new growth underneath), to stretch out the muscles in their shoulders and back, to mark their territory around other cats, and to serve as an emotional outlet (scratching after being startled, frustrated, or relieved at the owner returning home). Cats need to scratch just as puppies need to chew, so the owner's goal is not to eliminate the behavior but to manage it in the safest and least destructive way possible.

Some owners of dedicated scratchers consider declawing them, but there are consequences to be considered first. First, it is serious and permanent surgery, the equivalent of having the last joint of all of your fingers removed. Cats experience pain for days afterward, during which they may need alternate litter in their box that won't further irritate their wounds. Declawed cats are utterly defenseless against attackers, and so can never be let outside. Declawing can also alter a cat's sense of balance, a danger in any animal that likes to climb. All in all, many veterinarians consider declawing a last resort. Teaching a cat to use appropriate surfaces for scratching is much less traumatic for all involved.

Follow these tips to get your cat started:

**Provide the right scratching post:** Pam Johnson-Bennett, author of Think Like a Cat, provides three rules for a scratching post. It must be:

1. covered in the right material,
2. sturdy and well-constructed, and
3. tall enough for a full stretch.

What is the right material? Bennett recommends sisal, rope or any rough texture. Carpet is OK only if the material is rough enough. The post must be sturdy enough that the cat cannot tip it, so we recommend cat trees (tall posts with multiple perching levels) that allow the cat to adequately stretch its back muscles.

**Location, location:** Keep the post plainly visible; do not hide it in the spare bedroom! If the post is for a kitten, put it in the middle of his room where he can't miss it. You want the post to be accessible to the cat when you come home, after he's awoken from a nap and after he's eaten. This won't happen if he can't find it!

**Introducing kitty to the post:** Whether your cat is young or old, make this process a game. Dangle a cat-teaser near or over the post and wait for him to put his claws on it. If he shows no interest, turn the post on its side and keep playing. If you choose, you can gently run your fingernails over the post but *do not put the cat's paws on it*: he won't understand what you're doing and may learn to dislike the post. Once he discovers the



texture and begins scratching, praise him for using it. If he's food motivated, you can offer him a small treat.

**No punishment.** Scratching is a normal behavior so it cannot be reprimanded: focus on redirecting the cat back to his post with the game described above. Some people recommend remote punishing devices, like attaching inflated balloons to the furniture (so that they will pop when scratched and deter future scratching), but we don't recommend this. Many cats find it too frightening, and the noise may punish other cats in the household who are doing nothing wrong. Still other cats have been known to eat balloon fragments and become ill.

**Make your furniture unappealing to the cat.** Double-sided tape can leave a residue on furniture, so we recommend instead a product called Sticky Paws, a water-soluble adhesive applied like tape. Apply this to areas the cat has already been scratching. If the cat has been using the entire piece of furniture, cover it with a sheet (taping the bottom so he can't climb up underneath it) and apply Sticky Paws or double-sided tape at various spots. Place his post right next to the furniture. When the cat has been routinely using the post instead of the furniture, *gradually* move it (an inch each day) to where you want it permanently located, remembering that it should still be highly visible. When the cat appears to go right for his post without paying attention to the furniture, take the sheet off.

**Trim his claws regularly.** Well-trimmed claws don't do as much damage, so have your vet or groomer show you how to trim them. The Animal Humane Society also conducts a monthly "Chip and Nail Clinic", providing microchipping and nail-trimming at low cost for the public.

**Other options for damage control.** Some cats prefer horizontal scratching surfaces to vertical ones, and major pet supply stores carry such products in their cat section. You might also consider Soft Paws, little plastic caps that can be glued to your cat's nails. The cat will still attempt to scratch, but the caps will prevent damage to your furniture. (This option is best for owners who are unable to train their cats to a post but do not want to declaw them.) The caps typically last one to two months: any that have not fallen off or been chewed off by the cat will have to be removed as the cat's nails grow.

**Don't throw that old post!** When your cat's current post is falling apart/shredded/looks awful and you decide to get a new one, simply put it alongside the old post. If you remove the old one altogether, your cat may not use the new one at all. The old one was really "his", with his own marks and scent. Remember that scratching is not just for marking and nail-maintenance, but serves as an emotional outlet as well. If he really and truly abandons the old post for the new one, you can get rid of it.

Obviously, there are lots of ways to teach a cat to scratch appropriately without resorting to physical punishment or permanent surgery. Provide your cat with plenty of enjoyable outlets for his scratching, and the two (or more) of you will reap the rewards. Good luck!