



BEHAVIOR
SERIES

Cats: Destructive Scratching

Although some people think a cat's scratching behavior is a reflection of her distaste for a couch's upholstery, a not-so-subtle hint to open the drapes, or a poorly conceived Zorro impersonation, the fact is that cats scratch objects in their environment for many perfectly normal reasons.

Why Do Cats Scratch?

Cats scratch for many reasons, including:

- To remove the dead outer layer of their claws.
- To mark their territory by leaving both a visual mark and a scent—they have scent glands on their paws.
- To stretch their bodies and flex their feet and claws.
- To work off energy.

Because scratching is a normal behavior and one that cats are highly motivated to display, it's unrealistic to try to prevent them from scratching. Instead, the goal in resolving scratching problems is to redirect the scratching onto acceptable objects.

Training Your Cat to Scratch Acceptable Objects

You must provide objects for scratching that are appealing, attractive, and convenient from your cat's point of view. Start by observing the physical features of the objects your cat is scratching. The answers to the following questions will help you understand your cat's scratching preferences:

- Where are they located? Prominent objects, objects close to sleeping areas, and objects near the entrance to a room are often chosen.

- What texture do they have—are they soft or coarse?
- What shape do they have—are they horizontal or vertical?
- How tall are they? At what height does your cat scratch?

Now, considering your cat's demonstrated preferences, substitute similar objects for her to scratch (rope-wrapped posts, corrugated cardboard, or even a log). Place the acceptable object(s) near the inappropriate object(s) that she's already using. Make sure the objects are stable and won't fall over or move around when she uses them.

Cover the inappropriate objects with something your cat will find unappealing, such as double-sided sticky tape, aluminum foil, sheets of sandpaper, or a plastic carpet runner with the pointy side up. Or you may give the objects an aversive odor by attaching cotton balls containing perfume, a muscle rub, or other safe yet unpleasant substances. Be careful with odors, though, because you don't want the nearby acceptable objects to also smell unpleasant.

When your cat is consistently using the appropriate object, it can be moved very gradually (no more than three inches each day) to a location more suitable to you. It's best, however, to keep the appropriate scratching objects as close to your cat's preferred scratching locations as possible.

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