

CATS AND DESTRUCTIVE SCRATCHING

Why Does Kitty Scratch?

It's normal for Kitty to scratch objects in her environment for many reasons:

- To remove the dead outer layer of her claws.
- To mark her territory by leaving both a visual mark and a scent from the glands in her paws.
- To stretch her body and flex her feet and claws.
- To work off Kitty energy.



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

Training Kitty to Scratch Acceptable Objects

Provide Kitty with objects for scratching that are appealing, attractive and convenient from her point of view. Start by observing the physical features of the objects Kitty is currently scratching. The answers to the following questions will help determine Kitty's scratching preferences:

- Where are the objects located? Prominent objects, objects close to sleeping areas and areas near the entrance to a room are often chosen.
- What texture do they have – are they soft or coarse? Carpeted?
- What shape do they have - are they horizontal or vertical?
- How tall are they? At what height does your cat scratch?

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

Cover the inappropriate objects with something Kitty will find unappealing, such as double sided sticky tape, aluminum foil, sheets of sandpaper or a plastic carpet runner with the pointy side up. Apply an aversive odor by attaching cotton balls containing perfume, muscle rub or other unpleasant odors to the item.

When Kitty is consistently using the appropriate object, it can be moved very gradually - no more than three inches each day to a more suitable location. It's best however, to keep

the appropriate scratching objects as close to Kitty's preferred scratching locations as possible.

Don't remove the unappealing coverings or odors from the inappropriate objects until Kitty is consistently using the appropriate objects in their permanent locations for several weeks, or even a month. The items should then be removed gradually, not all at once.

Should Kitty be Punished for Scratching?

No, punishment is effective only if Kitty is caught in the act of scratching unacceptable objects and acceptable items have previously been provided. Punishment after the fact, won't change the behavior - it may cause Kitty become afraid of the environment and may elicit defensive aggression. Used by itself, punishment won't resolve scratching problems because it doesn't teach Kitty where to scratch.

If Kitty is caught in the act of scratching inappropriate objects, remote or indirect punishment is best. Ideas for remote punishment include making a loud noise such as blowing a whistle, shaking a pop can filled with rocks or slapping the wall, throwing a soft pillow at Kitty, or using a water-filled squirt bottle.

If punishment is interactive, Kitty will learn to refrain from scratching in the presence of people, but will continue to scratch when they're not around.

How to Trim Kitty's Claws

To help keep them sharp, cats keep their claws retracted except when they're needed. As the claws grow too long and become curved, they can't be retracted completely. Clip off the sharp tips of Kitty's claws on all four feet every week or so. Clipping Kitty's claws will also help prevent them from becoming snagged in carpets, fabrics and skin. Before trimming Kitty's claws, accustom her to having her paws handled and squeezed. Begin by gently petting her legs and paws while giving her a treat. This will help to make it a more pleasant experience. Gradually increase the pressure so that petting becomes gentle squeezing, as this is required to extend the claw. Continue with the treats until Kitty tolerates this kind of touching and restraint. It may take a little longer if she's not used to having her legs or paws handled.

Apply a small amount of pressure to Kitty's paw, with thumb on top of her paw and index finger underneath, until a claw is extended. Look for the pink or quick, which is a small blood vessel. Don't cut into this pink portion, as it will bleed and be painful for Kitty. Cut off only the sharp tip of the claw - the hook. This will dull the claw and prevent extensive damage to household objects and skin.

There are several types of claw trimmers designed especially for pets. These are better than human nail clippers because they won't crush the claw. Until Kitty has become accustomed to the routine, one foot a day is enough of a challenge. To avoid negative memories of claw clippers, don't push to do all four claws at once.

What About Declawing?

ARF strongly discourages cat owners from having their cats declawed. Scratching is a natural behavior and instinct for cats and can be directed to appropriate items, such as a cat scratching post. Without the ability to claw, Kitty may develop behavior problems that she had previously not experienced.