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 scent (the have scent glands on their paws).
- To stretch their bodies and flex their feet and claws.
- To work-off energy.

Since 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 on to 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, such as rope-wrapped posts, corrugated cardboard or

even a log. Place the acceptable object(s) near the inappropriate objects(s) that she's already using. Make sure the appropriate objects are stable and won't fall or move around when she's using them.

Cover the inappropriate object(s) with something your cat will find unappealing, such a double-sided sticky tape, aluminum foil, sheets of sand paper or a plastic carpet runner with the pointy side up. Alternately, you may give the inappropriate objects an abrasive odor by attaching cotton balls containing perfume, muscle rub or other safe yet unpleasant substances. Be careful with odors, however, 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.

Should I Punish My Cat for Scratching?

No! Punishment is effective only if you catch your cat in the act of scratching unacceptable objects and have provided her with acceptable scratching objects. Punishment after the fact will not change the behavior, and may cause her to be afraid of you or the environment and therefore elicit defensive aggression.

Alone, punishment won't resolve scratching problems because it doesn't teach your cat where to scratch instead. If you do catch your cat in the act of scratching inappropriate objects, punish her in a way that prevents her from associating the punishment with you.

How Do I Trim My Cat's Claws?

To help keep them sharp, cats keep their claws retracted until they're needed. As the claws grow too long and become curved, they can't be retracted completely. You should clip off the sharp tips of your cat's claws on her front feet every two weeks or so. Clipping your cat's claws will also help prevent them from becoming snagged on carpets and fabrics, not to mention your skin!

Getting Your Cat Accustomed to the Trimming Process

Before trimming your cat's claws for the first time, help her get accustomed to having her paws handled and squeezed. You can do this by gently petting her legs and paws while giving her a treat. This will help make claw-trimming a more pleasant experience. Gradually increase the pressure so that petting becomes gentle squeezing, as you'll need to do this to extend the claw. Continue with the treats until your cat 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.

Trimming Your Cat's Claws

Apply a small amount of pressure to her paw, with your thumb on top of her paw and your index finger underneath, until a claw is extended. You should be able to see the pink, or "quick," which is a small blood vessel in the claw. Don't cut into this pink portion, as it will bleed and be painful for your cat. If you cut off just the sharp tip of the claw (the "hook"), it will dull the claw and prevent extensive damage to household objects as well as your skin.

There are several types of claw trimmers designed especially for pets. These are better than your own nail clipper, because they won't crush the claw. Until you and your cat have become accustomed to the routine, one claw or foot per day is enough of a challenge. Don't push to do all of them at once, or you will both have only negative memories of claw clippers.

Should I Declaw My Cat?

Declawing is a procedure whereby a veterinarian amputates the end digit and claw of a cat's paw, similar in scope to cutting off a person's finger at the last joint. The Humane Society of the United States opposes declawing when done solely for the convenience of the owner. Scratching is a natural behavior for cats and can be directed to appropriate items. Declawing can also lead to litter box or aggression problems.

However, if you feel that you must either decalw your cat or give her up, we would rather see your cat stay in her home and be your lifelong companion. If you decide to have your cat declawed, we suggest that you have the surgery done at the same time she's spayed (or neutered, if your cat is a male). Never have rear paws declawed, and be sure to always keep your cat indoors. Without claws to defend herself or climb to escape, your cat is in much greater danger outdoors – and the great outdoors is a very unsafe place for cats to begin with.