

FURNITURE SCRATCHING

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OVERVIEW

Cats make great pets. They love to play, they love to cuddle when you're watching TV or sleeping, and they purr for no reason other than being near you. But they also love to scratch. Unfortunately, the things they love to scratch are often the legs of your antique table, your upholstered sofa, or your expensive stereo speakers. And no amount of reprimanding or pulling out your hair in frustration seems to make them stop. But don't despair; there are some things you can do.

Scratching is easier to deal with if you understand why cats scratch in the first place. In the wild, cats scratch around their immediate environment to signal their presence to other cats and to claim the area in question. The marking takes two forms: visual and olfactory. The visual mark is in the form of clawing marks and is so obvious that even we humans can recognize it (not that we appreciate its significance). The olfactory mark is subtler, involving the release of pheromones. These are substances secreted from the body to be picked up by members of the same species, causing them to alter their behavior.

Cats secrete pheromones from superficial glands in the skin of the cat's paws through the process of kneading. The message is invisible to all creatures and is undetectable unless you have the right equipment (a super sensitive nose) and are close enough. A competitor coming up to the site will see the scratch marks and then smell the message: another cat has already claimed this place. One thing's for sure; the signal is not a friendly one.

Scratching has additional functions, too. You might think your cat scratches to sharpen his claws, but it's more likely it provides your cat with a form of physical therapy for the muscles and tendons of his paws. It also assists in shucking off old nail husks.

THE DOMESTIC SITUATION

Healthy and natural to your cat, scratching can become a real problem for the owner. Even your fairly secure housecat will occasionally feel the need to leave his mark by scratching, and the most usual target is your furniture.

Faced with this problem, many people consider declawing surgery. Many veterinarians believe declawing is a painful and unnecessary surgery and refuse to do it for humane reasons. Instead, they advocate training your cat to use a scratching post. However, some veterinarians still believe declawing is a safe procedure.



DECLAWING FACTS

- The surgery. The procedure for declawing involves more than just removal of the nail. It also removes the nail bed and often part or all of the last digit (finger bone).
- Intensity of pain. Many cats recovering from this surgery suffer from pain as they wake up. In fact, declawing is considered such a painful surgery that it has been used in studies to investigate methods of pain relief.
- Duration of pain. In most cases the pain appears to subside after 24 to 36 hours. However, during that time your cat will be gingerly walking around the place as if his paws are extremely tender – and they probably are. In other instances the pain lasts considerably longer, especially if there are surgical complications.
- Adverse consequences. Some cats are still hobbling around years later, though the majority eventually return to “normal” as far as we can tell.
- Litterbox use after the surgery. Your cat might find the litter painful on his tender paws. Vets often recommend putting torn up newspaper in the litterbox to prevent litter particles from adhering to the wounds. This practice sometimes leads to litterbox aversion and subsequently inappropriate elimination of urine and/or feces.
- Behavioral change. Aggressive cats may be more likely to bite instead of swat with their paws once they have been declawed.

ALTERNATIVES TO DECLAWING

There are several good options to declawing. These take the form of training your cat to use scratching posts, trimming the nails, and nail covers.

SCRATCHING POSTS

To persuade your cat to use a scratching post, you have to understand some basics:

- Keep one extra scratching post in the household. If you have four cats, keep five posts. Once the problem is under control, those that are not being used can be removed.
- Each scratching post should be tall enough for your cat to stretch up to its full height without being able to reach the top, i.e. about 3 feet high.
- The scratching post should be steady. No self-respecting cat will entertain the thought of using a post that rocks or falls over.
- Use the correct material. One of the essential functions of scratching is to leave a visible mark. Fabric

that doesn't tear or fray will be of no use. Burlap is a favorite with many cats.

- Choose an attractive location for your cat. Most people try to hide scratching posts from view. This completely negates the whole purpose of scratching for the cat. Position posts in obvious areas at first, preferably near scratching sites that your cat has selected for himself, then gradually repositioned to less obvious places later.

DETERRENTS

Several deterrents are available and may help.

- Physical. If a particularly valuable piece of furniture must be protected during training, heavy gauge plastic sheeting can be applied to alter its texture and to serve as a deterrent.
- Chemical. You can try moth repellent aerosols, which contain naphthol, though the area has to be "freshened" periodically as the odor will fade.
- Pheromonal. "Feliway®," a pheromone-containing proprietary spray, has been touted as a repellent for furniture scratching cats. The idea is that the pheromone, a natural scent signal and, in this case, an extract of feline facial secretions, will alter the "significance" of the previously scratch-marked area.
- Environmental measures. Territorial stress may aggravate marking. If there are squabbles between cohabiting cats, or if a dominant or anxious cat is constantly aggravated by neighborhood intruders, you should address these territorial issues first.

NAIL COVERS

A few years ago an excellent product was introduced to reduce damage from furniture scratching humanely. "Soft Paws"™ (or Soft Claws) are plastic nail caps that can be super-glued to a cat's claws following a preliminary nail trim. The results are often spectacular, with damage to furniture practically non-existent while the nail caps remain in place. The manufacturers recommend a complete replacement every month or so, but replacing lost nails individually as they fall off also works (and involves far less work).

NAIL TRIMS

Damage to furniture can be reduced if the cat's nails are kept well trimmed. It helps to learn how to do this yourself and to have a sharp pair of nail trimmers made specifically for cats (don't use human trimmers). It is sufficient to remove the sharp points so that the nail ends are squared but take care not to cut into the "quick" – the vascular and sensitive part of the nail. Ask your veterinarian to teach you how and to recommend some good nail clippers.

