

Dealing With Destructive Cat Scratching

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Cats use their front claws to scratch objects for many reasons, including communication, and they tend to return to the same object repeatedly. Because scratching is an unlearned act, it usually cannot be completely prevented or stopped. When such scratching is done indoors on walls, furniture or carpeted areas it can result in considerable damage, owner frustration and sometimes the loss of the home for the cat. It is easier to prevent problem scratching rather than trying to change your cat's preference for the arm of your sofa after it has become an established habit. Thus, the goal is to establish acceptable scratching habits by getting your cat to prefer a scratching post rather than the arm of your sofa.

Some pointers for establishing good scratching habits in kittens and newly acquired adult cats:

1. Put out several scratching posts in 2 or 3 areas most used by the cat, such as near the sleeping place, and the places the cat most likes to rest and to play.
2. You can make your own scratching objects rather than purchasing them, but be sure the scratching surface is fabric that is easy for the cat to shred.
3. Don't put the cat's paws on the post and force it to scratch. Kittens are born knowing how to scratch and restraining the cat to drag its paws over the post may be very unpleasant and actually cause the cat to avoid the post.
4. Do encourage scratching on the post by playing with dangle-toys on or near the post, scenting the post with catnip, using praise and food rewards when the cat scratches the post or even scratching the post yourself to stimulate the cat to scratch.

For older cats who have an established scratching problem:

1. Make the damaged scratching area unavailable or cover it with thick plastic so that it feels different and less appealing.
2. Put the scratching post next to the damaged area and be sure it is covered with a material that is acceptable to the cat. Some cats prefer to rake loose-weaved fabric, while others like to "pick" at knobby textures.
3. Because cats like to scratch in prominent areas of their home, you may need to leave the post in the area where the cat prefers to scratch. Your cat may not scratch a post located in the back corner of the basement.

Most cats can be taught or retrained to scratch a post and not damage other things. If these ideas do not resolve the problem, talk to your veterinarian about a referral to an animal behaviorist. Declawing your cat should be the last resort if all else fails.