

Destructive Cat Scratching
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As we pointed out in a previous column, cats scratch objects with their front claws as a form of social marking to communicate with other cats or people. The message communicated to other cats is not understood but may be a territorial marker or just a flag that lets other cats know that Fluffy is alive, well and living in a particular place. 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.

As with many behavioral problems it is better to prevent the problem than to try to stop it after it has become an established habit. Because scratching is an unlearned act, it cannot not usually be completely prevented or stopped, so the goal is to get the cat to prefer to scratch on a scratching post and not the arm of your sofa.

Some pointers for establishing good scratching habits in kittens:

1. Put out 2 or 3 scratching posts in areas most used by the kitten, near the sleeping place, and the places the kitten most likes to sit and to play.
2. Posts don't have to be purchased, but be sure the scratching surface is one that is easy for the cat to thread, like loose-weave fabrics.
3. Don't put the cats paws on the post and force it to scratch. Kittens are born knowing how to scratch and dragging the kittens paws over the post may only cause fear of the post.
4. Do encourage scratching on the post by playing with dangle-toys on or near the post, using praise and food treat rewards for scratching the post or even scratching the post yourself to stimulate the cat to scratch.

For older cats that 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 surface that is appealing like the material being damaged or a loose-weave fabric. Many cats don't like the carpeting or sisal that comes on most purchased scratching posts.
3. Because cats like to scratch in prominent areas of their home, you may need to leave the post in the area the cat is scratching. 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 aren't working, talk to your veterinarian about a referral to an animal behaviorist for help. Declawing your cat should be the last resort if all else fails.