

Feline Destructive Scratching

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The first step is to find one or two locations and surface textures that are appealing to the cat and acceptable to the family to allow the cat an outlet for scratching (i.e., scratching posts). The owner may need to offer several different types until a suitable one is found. However, if there are particular surfaces and locations that the cat prefers it would be best to provide a scratching post with the most appealing substrate at or near to the location where the cat prefers to scratch. When selecting a place, a few posts might be provided near entry and exit points if the cat goes outdoors and near the area where the cat sleeps. The scratching post should be stable and tall enough for the cat to sit on its hind legs and stretch out to engage in the scratching motion. Some cats prefer to scratch on horizontal surfaces such as carpet or the underside of a bed (while lying on their backs). Commercial posts made of sisal or corrugated cardboard or even an upright fireplace log might be appealing, while tightly woven materials or those with a horizontal weave are unlikely to be appealing. The posts can be placed in front of or mounted onto areas where the cat prefers to scratch. Another alternative is to move objects or furniture that the cat is scratching and to place a scratching post at that location. The family should reward desirable scratching (clicker training can be helpful), although simply allowing the cat to scratch in acceptable areas may be sufficiently self-reinforcing to the cat. Gently rubbing the cat's paws on the area as a form of interdigital scent marking might help to encourage further scratching, but this can be fear-evoking if a positive outcome cannot be achieved.⁶ Recent studies have found that a synthetic analogue of the feline interdigital pheromone, Feliscratch™ (which at the time of writing is not yet commercially available) can effectively encourage cats to scratch on a post or surface where the product has been applied.^{7,8} It may also be useful in training young kittens where to scratch.

During initial training, the cat should be closely supervised. When it can't be supervised, access to problem areas should be denied. The cat can be confined to an area where it has acceptable areas for scratching, climbing, perching, play, litter, and water and access prevented to areas where scratching is not acceptable. The cat should be engaged in alternate behaviors whenever possible. Desirable scratching should immediately be rewarded, and the cat should be covertly interrupted if it begins to scratch on an unacceptable surface. Remote forms of punishment such as a remote-activated spray device, hair dryer, or alarm might teach the cat to avoid the area without association with the owner. Another option is to protect the problem areas by draping a loose sheet of fabric or a thick sheet of plastic over the area to make the site less appealing to scratch or by making the site unpleasant using an aversive odor, double-sided tape, or a motion-activated alarm (e.g. Scraminal™ - available at Westwood Animal Hospital) coverings or spray device. Another form of booby trap is to drape a towel over the area with a stack of plastic cups or empty soda cans on top so that they noisily tumble down when the towel is pulled. While these techniques are intended to cause the cat to avoid the area, they should not be sufficiently intense to cause fear or anxiety. When the presence of the booby trap or alarm is obvious, some cats will soon recognize when it is safe to approach the area and when it is not, so that the owner may need to booby trap the areas persistently. Over time if the provided scratching areas are desirable to the cat, it should begin to return to these familiar areas for scratching and scent marking and have a decreased interest in scratching other areas of the home. Claw (nail) trimming and plastic nail cap coverings (Soft Paws™ - available at Westwood Animal Hospital) are other options to reduce scratching damage. When scratching occurs as a marking behavior, there may be multiple sites with varying degrees of social significance and owners will need to focus on the stressors that might be responsible for the marking. Possible causes include cats visiting in the yard, a new pet added to the home, social problems within the home, or major environmental changes (e.g., new furniture, new plants, remodeling, moving). In addition to blocking access to stimuli that might incite marking and resolving the underlying conflict where possible (see other chapters for details on redirected aggression and intraspecific aggression), for these cases the pheromone spray Feliway™ (available at Westwood Animal Hospital) may be helpful. Feliway™ should be sprayed over the scratched area once per day. Another option if the cat begins to target new sites is a Feliway electronic diffuser. At the same time, the appeal of the desired scratching sites might be increased by finding a new, more appealing surface or location, placing toys or catnip in the area or atop the scratching post, reinforcing use of the post with treats or play toys or by placing the feline interdigital pheromone Feliscratch™ (not available in the US at the time of this writing) on the post. On the other hand, new material and new posts may be less appealing than previously marked surfaces and posts.

Some owners are unable to train their cats to stop furniture scratching despite attempts at training and behavioral modification. These owners may then be faced with the undesirable options of rehoming the cat, allowing the cat to go outdoors, or constant confinement. In North America, scratching is a major reason for cat

relinquishment. Cats that are relinquished to shelters run the risk of being euthanized. Another alternative, which is performed relatively frequently in North America but is condemned and even illegal in some countries, is declawing. In North America it has been estimated that about 86% of cats presented for declawing are due to household damage and 29% are to prevent human-related injuries.⁹ While declawing is considered inhumane and is now illegal in many countries, the surgery continues to be legally performed in some countries in an attempt to allow some owners to retain cats where they have been unwilling or unable to use behavioral and environmental management to prevent damage. Declawing is generally referred to as the surgical removal of the claws and third phalanx from the front feet, while tendonectomy removes a piece of the deep flexor tendon so that the cat retains its claws but cannot use them for scratching.

With accurate diagnosis, appropriate preventive and management advice, and the additional options of plastic nail caps and avoidance devices (such as the motion-activated alarm or air spray), it should be possible to advise owners as to how to manage their cats behaviorally without declawing. The most recent position statement of the American Association of Feline Practitioners is that, where scratching behavior is the determining factor as to whether a cat can remain as an acceptable pet in the home, or if there is a risk to immuno-compromised individuals that might be reduced, the decision to declaw should be considered and would also be an appropriate option. While there is no documentation of increased risk should these cats continue to go outdoors, it would be prudent to keep declawed cats only as indoor pets since they are unable to use their front claws to aid in climbing or defense.¹⁰ To date, studies have shown no long-term deleterious effects on behavior or health, including no effect on aggression or soiling.^{11–15} In addition, studies have shown that declawing successfully met the owners' objectives and many owners reported a stronger owner–cat bond.^{16,17} However there is little doubt that the surgery causes pain and discomfort which must be carefully managed.^{18,19} In addition, there are claims that certain surgical techniques and modalities may further speed recovery and reduce pain.²⁰ Tendonectomy, on the other hand, can lead to overgrowth of claws, the need for ongoing claw care, and potential long-term discomfort, and is not recommended.¹⁰

Prevention

Prevention should focus on providing for the needs of the kitten, setting up a play and scratching area as discussed under treatment (appropriate height, texture, and location – near sleeping areas), encouraging and reinforcing desirable scratching with toys and treats, supervision and prevention (including confinement where needed), and the use of interdigital pheromones (Feliway™) to attract the cat to the area .

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