

Scratching: A Normal Feline Routine

By: Jerry Climer

What cat owner hasn't said, "One more scratch, cat, and your dead." We say this in fun, of course, but isn't the daily scratching routine the worst of our cat's habits? We can live with a bit of litter on the floor or a morsel of food slopped over the dish, but scratching is an entirely different matter. This habit isn't just inconvenient, it can also become costly!

Scratching is as necessary and normal to a cat as are eating and sleeping. It is a vital and enjoyable part of your cat's routine.

While cat lovers long believed their pets scratched to sharpen their nails, we now know that this is only partly true. The thin tissue covering a cat's claws grow continuously, in much the same ways as our own fingernails and toenails do. As a cat scratches, this outer covering falls away, leaving new, sharp claws.

We take little notice when our cat scratches litter from its box or flips food from its dish onto the floor. But it's a different matter if the same cat digs into the upholstery of a favorite chair or takes a swipe at the living room drapes. Tempers flare as we see our hard-earned money disappear in a flurry of shredded fabric. Certainly, we think, this rambunctious cat must be taught where it may and where it may not scratch. Furthermore, the lessons must begin immediately.

Before you take measures to stop your cat from scratching your furniture, try this neat little bit of deception. Look around the room. Is the piece of furniture your cat likes to scratch situated near its favorite resting place? For example, your cat may lie on the back of the sofa to be in the sun or to look out the window. Many times, the cat will wake from a snooze, jump down, stretch and scratch the sofa leg simply because it is the nearest available spot.



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I have often solved feline behavior problems by moving pieces of furniture or, if necessary, rearranging an entire room. Cats normally follow a set pattern when entering a well-traveled area. They will either go around or go over each obstacle. When I moved my sofa from under a window to a spot against a wall across the room, my cats weren't upset. In fact, they even appeared delighted with the sofa's replacement: a new, high, wingback chair. With the sofa in a less desirable position, the cats rarely noticed it.

Cats love to scratch loosely woven materials. Keep this in mind when you buy furniture or when you reupholster the old pieces. Open-weave or rough-texture fabrics such as burlap or wool are bliss for a cat looking for a scratching place.

Because cats must scratch somewhere, a well-behaved animal must have acceptable toys and scratching places. If you give your cat room to exercise and varied forms of entertainment, it probably will not become obsessed with any single activity, such as excessive scratching, which can result from boredom or loneliness.

You can purchase a great variety of scratching posts, ranging from simple homemade pads to elaborate floor-to-ceiling cat trees displayed in pet shops. Any style of post will work, as long as your cat enjoys using the fabric. Be sure to select a post with a heavy bottom so that an energetic cat can dig into it without pulling the post down onto itself.

Although you can buy an expensive post, you may prefer to cover a padded board with your cat's favorite scratching material and place it close to your cat's favorite sleeping spot. I have discovered that our pets love a large, well-padded, burlap-covered, cement building block. It's heavy, the cat can scratch it on all sides and on top, and it's inexpensive.

Many cats enjoy natural wood logs or pine boards for their grooming, so you may want to conduct a little research before investing in a post.

If your cat refuses to use any kind of scratching post, try rubbing a little catnip on the post. The aroma should make the post irresistible. If your pet still refuses to scratch where you wish, rub the post with a piece of your clothing or bedding. Often it is not your soft bed or lap that your cat enjoys but the warmth and smell of the one the cat loves.

Combining the opportunity and equipment for a good stretch and scratch, together with the much-loved and familiar odors, should make the new scratching post a wonderful necessary toy.

*Jerry Climer is the author of *How to Raise a Cat When Nobody's Home* (Penny Dreadful Publishers, 1983), a book on effective cat care and training. If you have a question or suggestion about how to care for or train a cat, send it to *From One Cat Lover*, Cat Fancy Magazine, P.O. Box 6050, Mission Viejo, CA 92690. While Ms. Climer cannot promise to answer your letters personally, she will try to answer as many questions as possible in this column.*

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