

Scratching

by Gary Landsberg, DVM Doncaster Animal Clinic
99 Henderson Avenue Thornhill, Ontario L3T 2K9

Scratching is a perfectly normal feline behavior. Although scratching does serve to shorten and condition the claws, the primary reasons that cats scratch are to mark their territory and to stretch. Cats may also threaten or play with a swipe of their paws.

Scratching is usually directed at prominent objects such as tree trunks or fence posts. Play swatting with other cats seldom leads to injuries, since cats have a fairly thick coat for protection. When play does get a little rough, most cats are pretty good at sorting things out between themselves. Occasionally, rough play or territorial fighting does lead to injuries or abscesses that would require veterinary attention.

Far too many owners are preoccupied with punishing their cats for inappropriate scratching, instead of providing an appropriate scratching area.

Scratching posts and play centers

Since most cats love to scratch, play, explore, and climb, they must be provided with an appropriate area for these activities when indoors. If not, don't be surprised if you come home to objects strewn all over the floor, scratches on your furniture, and your cat playfully climbing or dangling from your drapes. Building or designing a scratching post, providing appropriate play toys, and keeping the cat away from potential problem areas are all that are needed to deal with most scratching problems.

Since cats use the post for marking and stretching, posts should be set up in prominent areas, with at least one situated close to the cat's sleeping quarters. The post should be tall enough for the cat to scratch while standing on hind legs with the forelegs extended and sturdy enough so that it does not topple when scratched. Some cats prefer a scratching post with a corner so that two sides can be scratched at once.

Special consideration should be given to the surface texture of the post. Commercial posts are often covered with tightly woven material for durability, but many cats prefer a loosely woven material where the claws can hook and tear during scratching. Carpet may be an acceptable covering, but it should be combed first to make certain that there are no tight loops. Some cats prefer sisal, a piece of material from an old chair, or even bare wood for scratching. Be certain to use a material that appeals to your cat.

A good way to get the cat to approach and use the post is to turn the scratching area into an interesting and desirable play center. Perches to climb on, spaces to climb into, and toys mounted on ropes or springs are highly appealing to most cats. Placing a few play toys, cardboard boxes, catnip treats, or even the food bowl in the area should help to keep the cat occupied. Food rewards can also be given if the owner observes the cat scratching at its post. A product known as Pavlov's™ has been designed to reward the cat automatically by dispensing food rewards each time the cat scratches. It may also be helpful to take the cat to the post, gently rub its paws along the post in a scratching motion, and give it a food reward. This technique should not be attempted, however, if it causes any fear or anxiety.

Preventing and correcting problem scratching

Despite the best of plans and the finest of scratching posts, some cats may continue to scratch or climb in inappropriate areas. At this point, a little time, effort, and ingenuity might be necessary. A brief consultation with your veterinarian may be helpful to get back on the right track. The first thing to consider is partial confinement or cat-proofing your home when you are not around to supervise. If the problem occurs in a few rooms, consider making them out of bounds by closing

off a few doors or by using childproofing techniques such as child locks or barricades. The cat may even have to be kept in a single room that has been effectively cat proofed, whenever the owner cannot supervise. Of course the cat's scratching post, play center, toys, and litter box should be located in this cat proof room. If cat proofing is not possible or the cat continues to use one or two pieces of furniture, you might want to consider moving the furniture, or placing a scratching post directly in front of the furniture that is being scratched. Some scratching posts are even designed to be wall mounted or hung on doors. Placing additional scratching posts in strategic areas may also be helpful for some cats. Punishment (booby traps and remote devices) may also be useful for keeping cats away from specific problem areas. As a last resort, the cat could be confined to a large crate with a litter box, toys and bedding, whenever the owner cannot supervise the cat. Crate training will effectively prevent most behavior problems, such as destructive behavior and house soiling. Should the owner ever catch the cat when it is scratching an inappropriate object, it should immediately be interrupted (preferably using one of the remote punishment techniques described below). Keeping the cat's nails properly trimmed or using plastic nail covers are also useful techniques for some owners.

Investigation and Play

An important part of the development of a young animal is a healthy desire to investigate and play. These behaviors, however, can lead to damage to the household as well as injury to the kitten. Preventing or correcting these problems is quite simple, provided that the owner accepts the cat's needs to play and investigate, and provides suitable opportunities and outlets for the cat to perform these behaviors. When the cat cannot be supervised, it should be left in a cat-proof area. Any of the owner's possessions or household objects that might be clawed, pounced on, explored, or knocked flying, should be either kept out of the cat's reach or bobby trapped. In addition to a play center and scratching post, the cat should be provided with play toys that can be swatted, batted, or chased. Cat toys on springs and those that are hung from doors or play centers often work well. Ping-Pong™ balls, whole walnuts, or catnip mice are often fun for cats to chase and attack. Some cats like to explore new objects, so a few empty boxes or paper bags (never plastic) will keep some cats entertained until the owner has time to play. Sometimes the best solution is to get a second cat for companionship and play. Be certain that the second cat is young, sociable and playful. Punishment techniques should be avoided except as described below.

Chewing

During exploration and play, kittens (and some adult cats) will chew on a variety of objects. Not only can this lead to damage or destruction of the owner's possessions, but some chewing can be dangerous to the cat. Potential targets of the cat's chewing should be kept out of the cat's reach. When this is not possible the cat may need to be confined to a cat-proof room, or the problem areas may have to be booby-trapped. String and thread, electric cords, plastic bags, twist ties, and pins and needles are just a few of the objects that, all too often, cats may chew or swallow.

Another common target of chewing is houseplants. The best solution is to keep the cat away from household plants whenever the cat cannot be supervised. Booby traps may also be effective. Some cats may be interested in chewing on dog toys or biscuits, and feeding a dry cat food may help satisfy a cat's need to chew. In some cats the desire for chewing plant material can best be satisfied by providing some greens (e.g., lettuce, parsley) in the food, or by planting a small kitty herb garden for chewing.

Fabric (Wool) Sucking

Although sucking on wool or other fabrics may be seen occasionally in any cat, the problem is most commonly seen in Burmese and Siamese cats. Although some cats do grow out of the problem within a few years, the problem may remain for life. The first step in correction is to try to

provide alternative objects for chewing and sucking. As mentioned, some cats may be interested in one of the many chew toys or chew treats designed primarily for dogs. A well-cooked bone with some gristle and meat could be considered, provided the cat sucks and gnaws on the bone without causing it to splinter. Feeding free choice dry diets or high-fiber foods may also be helpful. Second, be certain that the cat has plenty of play periods with the owners, or even a playmate to keep it exercised and occupied. Finally, cat-proofing techniques or booby traps whenever the owner cannot supervise will likely be required.

TO PUNISH OR NOT TO PUNISH

Direct punishment (i.e., where the owner punishes the pet) is never successful. The cat becomes fearful or aggressive toward the owners, and, at best, all that accomplished is that the cat learns to wait until the owners aren't watching before scratching. Under no circumstances should a cat ever be punished.

Remote punishment takes a great deal of time, effort, practice, and ingenuity. Remote punishment techniques and booby traps are the only types of punishment that might be of use for destructiveness and climbing onto furniture. If a cat is punished during scratching or climbing while the owner remains out of sight, the cat may learn to avoid the area whether the owner is present or not. Here's a simple example of how remote punishment might work:

Keep a close watch on the problem area while hidden out of sight (around a corner, in a nearby closet, or behind a piece of furniture). As soon as the cat enters the area or begins to climb or scratch, squirt the cat with a long range water gun. If the cat cannot determine where the noise or water is coming from, it should quickly learn to stay away from the area whether the owner is present or not.

Another alternative is to set up a remote control switch near the problem area and have a device such as a Water Pik[™] alarm, or hair dryer plugged in. As soon as scratching begins, the device can then be turned on by remote control to scare the cat away from the area.

For remote techniques to be successful there are two key elements. The first is that the owner must monitor the cat while out of sight so that the owner knows when the problem begins. A Tattle Tale monitor may be useful since it makes a loud beep as soon as the cat jostles the area.

Booby Traps

Perhaps the best way to discourage a cat from scratching on an inappropriate area would be to make the area less appealing (or downright unpleasant) for scratching. If the cat is scratching furniture, a large piece of material draped over the furniture may do the trick, since the cat won't be able to get its claws into the loose fabric. A small pyramid of empty tin cans or plastic containers could also be balanced on the arm of a chair so that it topples onto the cat when scratching begins. A piece of plastic carpet runner with the nubs facing up can be placed over a scratched piece of furniture to reduce its appeal, or a few strips of double-sided sticky tape would send most cats looking for another place to scratch (hopefully the scratching post).

Motion detector alarms should do the trick when all else fails. Most of these booby traps would also be effective for other destructive behaviors, such as chewing and sucking. Taste deterrents might also be helpful, provided they are unpleasant enough to deter the behavior. Products such as bitter apple, bitter lime or Tabasco Sauce[™] are often recommended, but many cats quickly learn to accept the taste. Never leave any objects or areas untreated until the cat learns to leave the object or area alone.

Additional reading:

Feline Behavior: W.B. Saunders, Philadelphia,

From the Cat's Point of View, Bohnenkamp Gwen, Perfect Paws, San Francisco, CA.

Feline Behavior Audiotapes. Bohnenkamp Gwen, James and Kenneth Publishers, Berkeley, CA.

Aggressive Behavior in Cats. Borchelt P.L., Voith V.L. Compend. Cont. Educ. Vet. Pract., 1987

The Behavior of the Domestic Cat, Bradshaw W.S. Redwood Press Ltd, Melksham, UK 1992