

MY CAT'S SCRATCHING THE FURNITURE

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

WHY DO CATS SCRATCH?

Cats scratch with their front claws by dragging them on horizontal or vertical surfaces. This loosens and removes the outer part of the claw (called the husk) revealing the sharp surface underneath.

Scratching also exercises the muscles in your cat's front legs and spine to help keep them fit. The surfaces chosen are usually rigid so that they don't move when the cat pulls while scratching.

Scratching is also used as a form of territorial communication between cats, also known as marking behaviour. Each cat produces a unique scent from sweat glands in between the pads of their feet and this is deposited when they scratch. The combination of this smell, the marks that are made and the discarded husks all act as a multi-sensory message for other cats.

If cats have access to outdoors they will scratch on fence posts and trees, for example, but many still like to do some scratching indoors. Popular things to scratch indoors include items made from soft woods, such as pine, fabric or leather sofas, textured wallpaper and carpet. Popular locations include door frames, furniture, the base of divan beds and stairs.

Cats can start to scratch frantically on the carpet when they play and even use scratching as a means of getting their owner's attention.

If your cat is scratching excessively and you have a multi-cat household, live in a densely cat-populated area or have recently had building work done (or other similar things going on around the home that might unsettle your cat), the scratching may be anxiety-related.

WHAT CAN I DO TO STOP MY CAT FROM DAMAGING MY FURNITURE AND CARPETS?

If your cat is scratching on a particular surface or object repeatedly it will almost inevitably cause damage that is impossible to repair. However, it is important to appreciate the appeal of this area in order to provide a suitable and more appropriate alternative for your cat to use:-

- For example, is the location significant? Some cats like to scratch after they have been asleep or in 'strategically significant' areas such as doorways or routes to favourite places, such as staircases.
- What height is the object that your cat is scratching? Is it a vertical surface, such as the arm of a sofa or wallpaper, or horizontal, such as the hall carpet?
- What is the texture of the surface being scratched? All of the answers to these questions will help you decide what an attractive alternative might look like.

Cat scratching furniture, boards and posts are readily available in all pet shops and online pet stores. They tend to be made of wood or heavy duty cardboard and covered in a material such as sisal string (wrapped round posts) or wood bark.

They are often multi-level pieces of cat furniture, allowing your cat to climb, perch and even sleep on raised beds that form part of the structure.

Scratching boards are also available, usually made out of compressed layers of corrugated cardboard (for cats who prefer to scratch on horizontal surfaces). Some are quite flimsy but larger sturdier models are big enough for the cat to stand on and scratch at the same time so they don't move around.

A general rule is that cats like to scratch on rigid surfaces that resist the pull of their claws, and they like their bodies to be stretched as high or as long as possible to get full benefit from the exercise.

Once a cat scratches on a surface, the scent and the marks will encourage more scratching in the same spot.

TOP TIP:

If space is an issue then flat panels with a rough surface for scratching can be fixed to walls. There are commercially produced versions or you can make something yourself using sisal, seagrass or coir matting.

I'VE BOUGHT A NEW SCRATCHING POST, HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE MY CAT TO USE IT?

Firstly, if you have purchased a tall post or multi-platform 'cat tree' make sure it is rigid and doesn't wobble – you might even need to attach the taller models with a bracket to the wall.

Make sure you are placing the new scratching surface in a location where your cat spends a lot of time or near where they have previously scratched.

Cats are naturally curious creatures but they don't like to feel that they are being forced to do something, so it is advisable to resist the temptation to carry your cat to the new scratching post and drag their paws down the surface to show them how to use it! Your cat may take some time to explore the new object but they will accept it more readily if they have decided when and how to use it.

If you are keen to speed up the process, a simple game involving a rod and string that dangles a toy around the base of the scratching post will encourage their claws to make contact with the surface to help promote a quick bout of scratching.

If you are introducing your cat to a modular cat tree with several levels, try placing some tasty treats on the various surfaces to encourage exploration.

TOP TIP:

Feliway® FELISCRATCH (Ceva) is a synthetic pheromone that copies the scent that is secreted from the glands between a cat's pads. When it is applied to a new scratching surface it encourages a cat to scratch there.

SHOULD I BE USING DETERRENENTS TO STOP FURTHER DAMAGE TO MY FURNITURE?

If your cat has developed a strong habit to use your furniture and carpets, then a new post may not be sufficient to break the habit completely and you will need to use safe deterrents to stop the cycle.

Deterrents should only be used once there are acceptable scratching areas nearby to use as an alternative.

Firstly, clean the damaged area to remove any trace of the scent that will be drawing your cat back to scratch some more. Low-tack double-sided adhesive tape* can be stuck over the area, providing an unpleasant (but not dangerous or harmful) experience when your cat puts their paws on it ready to scratch. ***It is essential to ensure that the tape is not too sticky since it could damage paws and fabric.**

Commercially available double-sided adhesive sheets can be purchased from some household cleaning suppliers specifically for this purpose, but they do need replacing with new fresh sheets over the top regularly as the adhesive attracts dust and fibres and loses its strength quite quickly.

There are various commercial scratching deterrents on the market that can be sprayed on the damaged area to prevent further approaches, but they do emit a strong odour that is likely to be offensive to cats and humans too, and they need to be regularly reapplied to be effective.

If wallpaper has been damaged then thin sheets of Perspex® (rigid plastic) can be cut to size and fitted over the damaged area of wallpaper using screws and raw plugs if appropriate.

This surface will be unattractive to scratch since it is smooth and it is also easily cleaned to remove any scent deposits. The low-tack double-sided adhesive tape can also be used over the affected area if the wallpaper is so badly damaged that it needs replacing anyway.

WOULD PUNISHING MY CAT DETER THEM FROM SCRATCHING THE FURNITURE?

It is never appropriate to punish your cat. Keep in mind that your cat is not being naughty. Scratching is a perfectly natural, normal behaviour for a cat and so they will have no understanding of acceptable or unacceptable places to scratch from a human perspective.

WHAT IF MY CAT'S SCRATCHING IS ANXIETY-RELATED?

Cats can become tense or anxious for many different reasons and the causes are not always easy to identify by owners.

Excessive scratching is rarely the only sign that your cat might be distressed. The solution to territorial scratch marking lies in identifying the underlying cause and this is best achieved by consulting with an expert.

If you are concerned that your cat's scratching is anxiety-related then you should contact your vet for referral to a behaviour specialist (see advice sheet [How to find a good cat behaviourist](#)).

TOP TIP:

In multi-cat households it is advisable to provide at least one scratching post per cat, placed in different parts of the home.