

Helping Your Cats Claw Their Way To Success

"Our cat is destroying everything in the house with her claws!" is one of the most common complaints from people who live with cats. Scratching is a natural behavior for cats, but it can be both annoying and destructive. Luckily, this behavior can also be modified humanely and effectively.

Why Cats Scratch

Like their wild ancestors, domestic cats use their claws for a variety of reasons. In some cases, scratching is a territorial behavior, with cats marking objects in their territory. Cats' claws are also their first line of defense against attack from other animals. By just extending their claws, cats can send a subtle warning message to "back-off" before more force is needed.

Mostly, cats scratch because it feels good to them. Using their claws is part of their normal exercise pattern. While kneading and stretching they both strengthen and relax the muscles of the feet, forelegs, backbone and shoulders.

The Problems With De-clawing

For many cat owners, their pet's natural impulse to scratch can become a problem and de-clawing may seem a logical solution. However, de-clawing creates more problems than it solves.

What exactly happens when a cat is de-clawed?

- 1) The cat is given a general anesthetic.
- 2) The fur around the feet is clipped.
- 3) A tourniquet is placed around the leg.
- 4) The nails are rinsed with alcohol.
- 5) The amputation of the nail is accomplished with a guillotine nail cutter, which cuts across the first joint of the toe and may also involve the foot pad.
- 6) The toes are then bandaged tightly to prevent hemorrhage.
- 7) The bandage is removed two to three days post-operatively.



Immediate physical complications can include:

- 1) An adverse reaction to the general anesthetic (this can include death).
- 2) If bandages are wrapped too tightly the foot may become gangrenous and necessitate amputation of the leg.
- 3) When bandages are removed many cats begin to hemorrhage and require re-bandaging.

Later physical complications can include:

- 1) In instances in which the entire nail bed was not removed, one or more claws can grow back misshapen and useless.
 - 2) Because their nails are brittle and because the surgical nail cutter may have been dull, many cats may experience shattered bones in their feet which can become seriously infected. This can be corrected only with a second general anesthetic and surgical procedure.
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De-clawing is a painful procedure that has long-lasting effects on cats. Once their claws have been removed they can no longer perform their natural stretching and kneading rituals. They become weaker as they age and may experience debilitating arthritis in their backs and shoulders.

Furthermore, cats without claws have lost their first line of defense, and because of this, they live in a constant state of stress. Less able to protect themselves, they cannot fight off other animals or escape quickly from a dangerous situation. They may also become biters because they no longer can use their claws as a warning. Groomers, veterinarians and people who care for de-clawed cats in shelters find many of them to be nervous, irritable and difficult to handle.

Finally, de-clawed cats often stop using their litterboxes. Some apparently associate the pain they feel in their paws with trying to cover their waste in the litterbox. They seek a less painful place for elimination, such as the carpet or bathtub. Even though there are effective ways to modify a cat's litterbox behavior, it is a particularly difficult challenge because a de-clawed cat's aversion results from pain.

Finding Good Solutions for Everyone

Obviously, de-clawing is not a humane alternative, but cat owners need not resign themselves to shredded furniture and carpets. Most people find they can meet their cats' natural needs by supplying a scratching post that cats find irresistible.

Choosing a Post

A post should be sturdy so it won't tip or fall while the cat is scratching. It should be at least three feet tall to allow the cat a full stretch. Most important is the surface of the post. Unfortunately, many commercially available posts are covered with the least appropriate materials, such as carpet or upholstery fabric, exactly the kinds of common household surfaces cats should avoid.

The best posts offer resistance and allow cats to really dig with their claws. They can be covered with the backside of carpet, thick burlap, or a durable hemp-like material called sisal that appeals to most cats.

If space allows, provide more than one post, especially in a multi-cat household. The best place to put a post is near the cat's favorite snoozing spot. Cats most like to scratch when they awaken from a nap and often after they eat or play.

Contrary to popular thinking, cats can be taught new behaviors. They will learn to use the post through positive reinforcement with some deterrence if necessary.

- Make the post irresistible by sprinkling or spraying catnip on it.
- Tie a favorite toy to the post. Center the cat's playtime around the post and make time spent there fun.
- Do not do anything that may startle the cat when she is in the vicinity of the post.
- Praise your cat lavishly each time she uses the post.
- If you see the cat eyeing furniture or carpet, calmly take her to the post and praise her when she begins to scratch there.

- If you catch your cat in the act of scratching in the wrong place, do not punish her. Instead, try to distract her with a loud noise or water from a squirt bottle. This will stop her mid-scratch so you can take her to the post immediately. Again, praise her for using the post instead.
- It may take a while before you can trust the cat not to claw furniture while you are away or asleep. To reinforce your lessons, deny the cat access to forbidden surfaces and make them less attractive. Cover furniture with a material cats do not like (foil, heavy plastic, sheets of paper with double-sided tape on them) or put the cat in a secure area of the house with no furniture or carpet. If you do confine the cat, even for short periods, be sure to provide a litterbox, water, toys and a scratching post so she will become accustomed to using it in your absence.

Clipping Cat Claws

Cat claws can be sharp, both on household furnishings and human skin. Cats must learn not to use their claws on skin or clothing. Never encourage a cat, especially a young one, to play rough with hands or feet. Instead, offer your pet a toy to kick and claw.

It also helps to trim your cat's claws regularly. This procedure is easy and, when done correctly, does not hurt the cat. Here's how to do it:

Step 1: Either sit close to the cat or hold her on your lap so she is comfortable and you can reach her paws. Press gently on the top of the foot near the base of the nail to extend the claw.

Step 2: Hold the paw firmly with the claw extended. For best results, use a clipper designed for cats. If you don't have one you can use regular nail trimmers as long as they are sharp. Trim off only the curved end of the claw as shown below. Do not clip into the pink area where the veins are located or you will hurt the cat. Do this for each claw, including the dewclaws on the sides of the front paws.

Step 3: If the cat complains as you clip the claw, make sure you are not trimming too closely. Talk to her softly as you go and praise or reward her with a treat when you are finished.

****NOTE: Polydactyl cats (cats with extra toes) are often unable to retract their claws and need to have the claws of their extra toes clipped to prevent them from growing into the flesh.***

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