

Humane Alternatives to Declawing

Scratching, for a cat, is not only a natural act, but a necessary one as well. It removes the dead outer sheaths of nail and it is a vital exercise technique which serves to stretch and strengthen their upper bodies. Also, cats mark their territory visually, especially in multi-cat households, as a way of determining rank. And finally, between your cat's toes are scent glands which leave her 'signature' when she scratches. Scratching is an essential element of cats' communication, problem-solving, health, and security issues. Remember, you **CAN'T** stop your cat from scratching, but you **CAN** replace what she scratches. Instead of her scratching items you value, you can provide her with surfaces you specifically provide for her to scratch on. Think smart and rechannel her desires. Below are a few solutions to prevent the damage a cat can inflict upon your furniture.



As for punishment, don't do it! Cats don't understand physical punishment and it is wrong to hit your cat. Punishment simply doesn't work and is likely to make your situation worse.

Scratching Posts & Cat Furniture

Training a cat to use a scratching post is the most common alternative to declawing. Ideally, you should install scratching posts in your house **before** you bring home a cat. Otherwise, you should put scratching posts next to the sofas, easy chairs, or carpets into which your cat is currently sinking their claws. A scratching post should be well anchored so that it will not tip over when the cat uses it. The scratching surface should be made from a strong material like sisal, hemp or carpet, whichever the cat prefers. Even better would be a combination of materials. Scratching posts, like litter pans, should be put on every story of the house to which a cat has access.

It is recommended to use not only a scratching post, but several, depending on how many areas your cat likes to scratch on already. For instance if he goes for both arms of the couch, then that's where you will want your posts at the start. Cat 'condos' or 'trees' are beneficial in many ways, one of which is to provide a common marking post in multi-cat households.

Before you invest a lot of money in buying or building a post, make sure you are catering to your feline friend's particular instincts. There are horizontal cardboard scratchers for carpet-lovers, wedge shaped ramps for cats who scratch low on furniture, and upright posts or 'trees' for cats who like that full body hang-from-the-claws feeling. The material that the furniture is made of is also important. Many cats prefer the feel of sisal rope-wound posts, and natural wood is also desirable in that it closely mimics what they'd like to scratch most of all - a tree! Sisal scratching posts are ideal for releasing Kitty's primal urges. This is a material she can shred to pieces with great satisfaction. Be sure not to throw it away when it is shredded, since that's when she's just broken it in satisfactorily, and she will not appreciate your tidiness. Beware of carpet covered furniture, mainly because it's hard to teach your cat that scratching 'this' carpet is 'OK,' but 'that' carpet isn't.

Remember that in order to fully exercise his upper extremities and get a good stretch, the cat must have the confidence to put all of his body weight into it, usually going for the highest reachable spot on the post. If the post has too small or insecure a base, it will wobble or tip as he pulls, eroding his confidence in the post and leading him back to the more stable furniture.

Once the post is in your home, rub it with catnip, or dangle your cat's favorite furry mouse from the top, creating a game which encourages your cat to mimic the motion of scratching. Your lavish praise will also help create a positive association with the act of scratching the cat furniture.

The reverse side of rugs also provides a good, satisfyingly resistant texture for clawing. You can place a piece of rug material over an area of carpet where Kitty has already been scratching. However, it must be stationary. Secure it so it doesn't move by duct taping the edges or placing it under furniture.

Discourage Certain Behavior

Aversive techniques work well with positive reinforcements. The human furniture must become unattractive to your cat. The hitch is that it has to be a constant aversion, 24/7, so techniques like using a water gun, spray bottle, or pebble-filled can may or may not help. In fact, such punishments may teach a timid cat to be more afraid of you, as well as the object. The other problem is, will you be able to provide this manual aversive stimulus every time your cat scratches? Probably not, so it's better to try measures that are consistent and will provide a constant in modifying her behavior.

Aversive products such as tin foil covering the spot, double-sided sticky tape such as Sticky Paws (which comes in versions designed specifically for furniture or plant), or a vinyl carpet runner with the spike side up. You may also be able to discourage her or him by using a scent such as citrus, which cats generally do not like, but which is not unpleasant for human beings. Check pet stores and catalogs for other deterrent ideas. All of these things will help break the cat of the habit, being that they are no longer physically pleasurable. But remember, aversive methods will only work when the cat is provided with an alternate surface that is equally acceptable.

Working to get your cat to embrace the idea of a new place to scratch is a slow procedure. It must become a part of their habits, which takes time. As the cat uses the post or cat furniture more, you can begin to lessen the aversive measures. If the cat is having a hard time accepting the post, it has been anecdotally successful to have daily sessions where you make the sound with your fingers of scratching on the post, accompanied by praise, and an irresistible treat to reward the cat as soon as he performs the desired action. This is important; the positives are heaped on the cat while he performs the action - a nano-second later and he'll have no idea why you are praising him. He'll like it, but he won't get the message. Take advantage of your kitten's desire to play and attach toys to the post. She will soon "dig in" to catch her toy and discover how good it feels to scratch this surface.

If you catch the cat in the act of scratching in the undesired spot, even with the aversives in place, correct the cat with a sound; hissing, a quick 'ah!', but nothing that she can interpret as punishing sounds associated with your voice. This is why we don't use the cat's name during the correction - only when he performs an action we approve of; his name is then only used in conjunction with praise. Especially at first, it's important to follow the correction with a trip to the post, where the cat has an opportunity to earn praise and again make positive connections with the experience of scratching in the right place. After the correction, the carrying over to the right place shouldn't have a punishing feel to it - don't scoop the cat off the ground in a sudden motion, or continue after the correction sound with further disapproving tones. Be patient; incorporating this new behavior into his routine may take a few months without having any 'slips'.

It's also a good idea to put a post where Kitty sleeps. Cats like to scratch when they awaken, especially in the morning and the middle of the night. If space permits, a scratching post in every room of the house is a cat's delight. The most important place is the area of the house in which you and your cat spend the most time. Initially, put the post where your cat goes to scratch. This may be by a sofa, a chair or wherever your cat has chosen as her territory, and you may need more than one post to cover her favorite spots. Remember that an important part of scratching is the cat's desire to mark a territory, so a scratching post should be in an area that's used by the family, not hidden in a back corner. After a time you can move the post away to the periphery of the room, but you'll need to do this gradually.

DO NOT take your cat's paws and make her scratch the post. This is a major turnoff and will only inspire a "you can't make me attitude." Even at an early age, cats refuse to be coerced into doing what they don't want to do.

Trimming Nails

Start young if you have the opportunity. It is easier to start kittens on the right path than to retrain an adult cat. You can lessen the amount of scratching your cats engage in by clipping every week or two.

Go slow. For approximately a week before the clipping, begin making your cat accustomed to having her paws handled. Paws are one of the most sensitive parts of a cat's body. Cats will often pull their paws away from you and make the job more difficult. If your cat is sensitive, try warming them up to the concept during petting sessions. When the cat is most relaxed, touch one of her paws. Then, gently push on their pads, extending a claw, gently praising the whole time. Respect when she's had enough, and that's all for that particular session. A minute or two is a good chunk of time. When your cat is accepting of that feeling, then try clipping. One or two nails per session is fine, at first, getting them used to the sensation while having a positive connection with your praise and gentle touch and perhaps a treat afterward. You can often clip a nail or two or three on a sleeping cat with no stress whatsoever. Be gentle and quiet. If he wakes up and pulls away, that's okay - remember, cats take many naps every day.

To trim a cat's claws, place her or him on a table or on your lap, and facing away from you. Lift one of the legs so that the lower part of the leg rests in your upturned fingers. Holding the leg securely but non-threateningly between the heel of your thumb and the tips of your middle, ring, and little fingers, grasp the paw between your thumb and forefinger. Press down gently on top of the paw with your thumb, spreading the toes and extending the claws. Check each claw individually. Do not trim blunt or rounded claws. Be careful to clip only the clear hooked part of the claw. **Avoid cutting into the pink tissue visible inside the nail.** In most cats, when the nails are extended you can easily see the clear part and the pink part. When starting out, it is better to err on the side of caution, especially with dark-colored nails where the quick is not obvious. Just one time cutting the rear part of the claw will hurt or even bleed, and will seriously set back your efforts at making the clipping process part of your cat's accepted routine. Make sure your trimmers are sharp. Dull trimmers will crush and splinter the nail.

Nail Caps

There are products which cover the claws and reduce the need for frequent trimming of the nails. A nontoxic glue is used to attach a plastic or vinyl cap over each claw. These can last up to 6 weeks and are not harmful if eaten by the cat. They have rounded edges, so your cat's scratching doesn't damage your furnishings. They are great for cats who won't use acceptable scratching outlets. The only drawback is that they get pushed off by new nail growth after several weeks, and need to be replaced, which can become costly if you are not able to clip the claw back and replace the cap yourself. However, they are also extremely useful for people who are away from home all day and simply can't take the time to train a cat to use a scratching post.

As a checklist, here are the pertinent things to remember:

1. Understand your cat's need to scratch.
2. Forget punishment--it doesn't work.
3. Provide a suitable place for your cat to scratch.
4. Make the scratching post attractive (use sisal posts).
5. Make the place she's been scratching unattractive.
6. Whenever possible, start cats young.
7. Trim your cat's claws.
8. Consider nail caps as an easy alternative.