

THE CAT DOC

Training tames cat's itch to scratch

Cats have claws and scratching is a normal behavior. Cats scratch to sharpen and clean their claws and to stretch, but they also scratch to leave their scent on things.



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If you go to the zoo or watch lions and tigers on nature shows, you will see the big cats engage in scratching behavior

similar to that of our pet cats. Instinct tells a cat to scratch, but training allows you to control where the scratching occurs in your home.

Yes, people, you can train your cat.

Many owners tell me their cat scratches the sofa, and when I ask if they have a scratching post somewhere in the house, they sometimes say no.

Other owners tell me they have a scratching post, but when I ask if they trained their cat to use it, they often say, again, no. Cats are smart, but they are not smart enough to know the difference between the arm of your sofa and a scratching post, unless you help them.

Getting a kitten to scratch in an appropriate spot is easy. You need to make it part of the daily routine of play and interaction. It is a good idea when you first get up in the morning to take your kitten to the scratching post, put his feet up on it, and help him scratch. You can also dangle toys on strings close to the post to stimulate the kitten to jump up and grab the post and toy. This play can occur several times during the day.

Scratching posts are made from three main materials: carpet, cardboard, and rope (sisal). Some cats have preferences for different materials, so if your cat is not interested in the post type that you have, try another kind.

If your cat likes to scratch a horizontal surface, the cardboard type of post that lays flat on the ground may be best. The cardboard posts often contain catnip, or catnip can be sprinkled or sprayed around the other types of posts. Catnip works as an attractant for most cats over the age of six months.



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Use toys to attract a kitten to a scratching post, such as a fluffy ball attached to a spring.

Kittens are not stimulated by catnip, and catnip attraction is actually a genetic trait.

Put the scratching post in an area where your cat likes to hang out. If the post is inconveniently placed, your cat is not going to search the house for it and will use other materials when he or she wants to stretch or scratch.

If your cat begins to scratch something inappropriate, squirt him with water or clap your hands loudly to get his attention and stop the behavior. If your cat has already been scratching something you don't want him too, try placing a scratching post right next to this spot and begin a transition to the post. If the cat starts using the post, then you can SLOWLY (over several weeks) move the post a few feet at a time to a better location.

To keep a cat from scratching carpet or furniture in the house, there are several items that can help. I have not seen repellent sprays work very well, but I have seen Feliway Spray to be effective. This pheromone spray was originally designed to prevent urine marking, but seems to work very well to keep cats from scratching things. Sticky Paws is wide double sided tape that can be placed on items you don't want scratched. Cats hate it when their feet stick to things and this will negatively reinforce scratching behavior.

Soft Paws, vinyl nail caps, are another solution to prevent damage by a cat that likes to scratch things. These nail caps are glued onto your cat's trimmed toenails and make the nails soft and smooth at the tips. Nail caps need to be reapplied every 4-6 weeks or sooner if you cat likes to chew them off.

If your cat has damaged a sofa or other piece of furniture that you want to replace, consider making a scratching post out of the item. By doing this, you know that your cat is already attracted to the material and will want to scratch it. You might need to confine your cat in a room with the scratching post and let him establish a habit before giving him the opportunity to scratch a new item.

Some cats will scratch things out of boredom. If you have a cat like this, he may scratch to get your attention, even if it is negative attention. Take this as a warning and play with him and find other outlets to stimulate him.

Don't give up on training your cat to scratch appropriate items. Make sure that he has a scratching post made out of a material he likes to scratch and it is placed in an area he can easily get too. Your cat needs to scratch, so help him out.

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