

Cats and Claws



Living with both



Why do cats scratch?

Scratching is a normal and instinctive behavior in cats. It gives them a way to mark their territory by sight and smell, conditioning their paws, and stretching their forelimbs. Scratching often increases during periods of stress and arousal.

When a cat scratches a person or other pet, it's for a reason. This is your signal to check into what may be causing fear or pain. A visit to the veterinarian can help figure out the problem. Taking away this signal by declawing the cat, however, can make matters worse. Without the ability to scratch to keep perceived threats away, the cat learns to bite instead, making life more troublesome for pet and owner alike.

What to do?

1. Pet a cat by starting at the head and neck, not the belly.
2. Look for signs of stress that may lead cats to a defensive scratch:
 - ears turning sideways
 - ears folding back
 - tail swishing back and forth
 - tail held tight against body
 - head held low
 - crouched body
 - dilated pupils
3. Provide a scratching post, rope, or carpet and cardboard surface. Most cats like a vertical post that is 3 feet or higher, with 2 or more levels — like a cat tree.
4. Put that scratching post at an entrance, in front of the sofa, or in front of a window. Why? Cats like to scratch there, in an open area, to announce their territory.
5. Make sure any scratching post is sturdy and run a toy to a string along the surface of the post to give the cat something to claw at. Rubbing a little cat nip on the post also helps. Gently saying “good, kitty” and offering a treat also reinforce the desired behavior.

6. Trim the cat's claws every 1-2 months, with a real claw clipper, not a nail clip for humans (any more than you would use pliers to trim your own fingernails).
7. Sit the cat on your lap at claw-trimming time, and offer a treat after trimming each claw. Bribery works wonders.
8. For a product that reduces claw damage, try nail caps, like those called Soft Paws®.
9. To get scratching out of a cat's system on a bad day, take it outside on a lead, with supervision, for a chance to scratch on natural surfaces outdoors.

What not to do?

DON'T

1. Don't try to first pet a cat on their lower body or belly. Most don't like it.
2. Don't approach a cat showing the signs of stress from #2 above. Keep a respectful distance until the cat calms down.
3. Don't pet a nervous-looking cat, or don't try anything but a gentle petting of the head until you get acquainted.
4. Never leave kids and cats alone together, without supervision. They misread each other, and scratches follow.
5. Don't put the scratching post in a corner. The cat likes it in a location where scratching it doubles as a way of marking territory (per item #4, above).
6. Don't assume that clawed cats can't be in the same household as declawed ones. They can co-exist very well.

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