

# CATS AND INAPPROPRIATE SCRATCHING

Scratching, for a cat, is actually a very appropriate behavior. In fact, it is quite necessary. Scratching serves a few significant purposes:

- Scratching keeps a cat's nails trim and prevents them from overgrowing by sloughing off the dead outer layer.
- Scratching signals a cat's presence to others with visual and scent evidence that they were there.
- Scratching exercises and relaxes a cat—much like our stretching exercises.
- Scratching deters perceived dangerous predators.

There are certainly times most of us would not deny a cat their need to scratch. But we would prefer they not exercise their need to scratch on our drapes, sofas, carpets or skin.

## **PRIORITY 1: TRIM YOUR CAT'S NAILS**

Let's first address the scratching that typically affects your belongings. The first thing you can do to minimize destruction of your belongings is trimming your cat's nails yourself. If you leave this task up to your cat alone, he may be doing far more scratching of your things than otherwise. An untrimmed claw can easily snag on carpet as your cat walks. When your cat makes an effort to un-snag his claw, he may quickly discover that this particular area of carpet would make "another" nice area to scratch. Practice—with the help of a vet, groomer or friend—trimming the nails of a cat who is accustomed to nail trimming. When YOU feel comfortable with the procedure, help your cat get more comfortable with the concept. Start by gently massaging his paws each day. Gradually increase the pressure until your cat is comfortable with the pressure required to help him expose his claws. Take your time, but set a goal of being able to trim one nail a day.

## **PRIORITY 2: CHANNEL THE SCRATCHING ENERGY**

Establish areas where your cat will be permitted to scratch. There are many products on the market designed to accommodate a cat's need to scratch (see Suggested Products). If you are the creative sort, or if you have a few pieces of material around, you can actually make a scratching "post" yourself. Below are a few examples:

- 1) **Supplies:** 1 plank of rough wood 1' W x 4' L x ½" H, 1 piece of carpet 1.5' x 4.5' and a staple gun  
**Directions:** Lay carpet upside-down. Lay wood on top. Staple carpet overhang to back of wood.
- 2) **Supplies:** 1 large (at least 3' tall) sturdy cardboard box, wood glue and enough sisal twine to cover 2 sides or the inside bottom panel of the box  
**Directions:** Thinly spread wood glue on 1 side of the box to be covered. Lay sisal twine in a back and forth pattern to cover the entire area. Place sisal side on protected floor and use books to apply pressure on the box until the glue is dried. Repeat for other side(s).
- 3) **Supplies:** 1 smallish tree stump, log or sturdy branch approximately 3.5' in length  
**Directions:** Place on skid-proof carpet mat on the floor, or connect to floor molding with hook and eye screws.

Key components to any scratching post:

- It must not topple over onto the cat when scratched.
- It should be tall/long enough to allow your cat to fully extend his body to scratch.
- It must be shred-able.

Your cat's actions will probably tell you whether they prefer a vertical or horizontal scratching area. Some cats like both. Usually cats prefer to scratch in a social area, rather than far away from everyone. In fact, many cats like to scratch in the same areas they like to play. Entice your cat to make use of the new scratching area by sprinkling it with catnip; attaching "scented" cotton balls (tuna oil, catnip spray, or even his own scent by wiping behind his ears) to it; or simply playing with your cat around the post.

### **PROTECT YOUR BELONGINGS**

There are several products on the market (see suggested products) that serve to make the previously scratched areas less desirable. The best solution will be one that makes the object unappealing AND does not require your presence to be effective. Homemade solutions might include:

- Pin cotton balls dipped in Ben-Gay to the area.
- Stack a few Styrofoam cups set to topple if the area is scratched.
- Cut a thin vinyl carpet runner and tack it in place—nubs pointing outward.
- Drill small holes in very thin plexi-glass and tack it in place to protect sofa corners, window sills or door frames.

Yelling at your cat, swatting at him, or squirting him with a spray bottle mostly serves to make YOU unappealing to your cat. And you certainly don't want to encourage him to run away from you. You also have the option of keeping treasured items behind closed doors so your cat cannot access them. Once he learns to use an appropriate scratching area, your belongings will be less at risk and you may be able to discontinue use of the homemade solutions.

### **PROTECT YOURSELF**

Scratching that poses harm to you or your family is obviously a more serious matter. Note that cats who scratch your furniture are not necessarily going to scratch people as well. Cats who scratch furniture are typically looking for a physical outlet—nail trimming, stretching, exercise, scenting. Cats who scratch people typically do so out of "self-defense" or misguided hunting behavior. A good nail trimming certainly helps to reduce damage, but in order to help reduce this behavior; we must examine the cause(s).

**Handling:** Your cat may enjoy handling, grooming, and petting, but he may only enjoy it for short periods. To avoid your cat letting you know up with his claws when the time is, make handling times frequent if you wish, but keep them very short. Aim to stop before his ears go back and his pupils dilate. He may learn gradually to tolerate handling for longer periods of time. If grooming is a problem, start with a dry baby's wash cloth, then a damp baby's wash cloth, then gentle brushing, then stronger brushing. Remember to take it slow. Spend days or weeks at each level if needed.

**Space:** Maybe your cat likes to sit in your lap, but he feels threatened if your face gets too close to his; or if you hold him in your arms as opposed to letting him sit in your lap. Your best solution may be just to respect his limits and enjoy his company without crowding him. Some cats can be picked up when they are in a standing position, but not when they are curled up. In that case, try gently tilting whatever he is lying on until he decides to walk.

**Hunting behavior:** If your cat claws your fingers because you were wiggling them under the covers for his entertainment, don't do that. Instead, wiggle a toy or a small stick under the blankets to entertain him. It is important that this play be performed away from your bed or sofa as you don't want him to learn to chase your toes as you rest. Some cats will swipe at passing ankles. Provide these cats with a rewarding distraction by tossing a treat, ball or toy away from you as you approach. And keep in mind that cat toys are designed to appropriately channel that natural hunting instinct, so spend lots of time playing with your cat and testing new toys. You may also want to try plastic nail caps on your cat. Applying them is not too difficult if your cat's nails are kept trim. And some cats keep them on for months. The Soft Paws brand is available in the Lora Robins Gift Shop at the Richmond SPCA.

### **SUGGESTED PRODUCTS**

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| Appropriate Scratchers: | Scratching posts, wedge-shaped cat scratchers (ex. Alpine Cat Scratcher), scratching pads that hang on a door knob, cat climbing trees (Note: Please make sure any tall climbing furniture is anchored to the floor or wall to avoid toppling accidents.) |
| Deterrents:             | Snappy Trainer, Scat Mat, "boundary" sprays (applied around your furniture, not sprayed at your cat), double-sided sticky tape.                                                                                                                           |