

# WHY CATS SCRATCH PEOPLE

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Separate from scratching on objects to maintain their claws, cats will sometimes scratch humans or other animals in play, due to overstimulation when touched, or to defend themselves from a perceived threat.

## ROUGH PLAY

Rough play is often observed in young energetic cats and in cats of all ages who are simply bored. Feline play mimics hunting behavior. In the wild, cats would expend their energy searching for and capturing food. Their days would follow cycles in which they would hunt, eat and feel satisfied, groom and then sleep to recharge for the next hunt. Our domestic housecats often have ample time for sleeping and fewer outlets for expending energy.

Give your cat lots of outlets for natural behavior. Try getting your cat on a schedule of play – eat – groom – sleep. Cats are sprinters, not marathon runners. They have energy spikes and do best with short but exhausting play multiple times per day. At least three times per day (more is better), give your cat an exciting play session. Then have the cat “catch” her meal by putting kibble in cat puzzle toys or hide it so she must climb and explore to get her meal. Put canned food in puppy-sized Kongs so the cat must lick and gnaw to get to it. Once they are tired and satiated, most cats will want to groom and then go to sleep.

Make sure not to do anything to accidentally encourage rough play behavior. If your cat bats at your feet as you try to sleep, close him or her out of your room at night. If your cat chases ankles or hands, stop moving and don't offer movements that may be interpreted as play in return. Do not scold or yell at your cat, as this is rewarding inappropriate behaviors with attention. If this doesn't help to deter the behavior, various bitter tasting and deterrent sprays are sold at pet suppliers which can be used to make your body less enticing as a toy. As you discourage inappropriate targets for your cat's play, be sure that you are also offering appropriate outlets for this energy.

Teach your cat how to appropriately expend energy. If your cat tries to play with your hands or feet, direct him or her to a toy. Figure out what your cat enjoys. Does your cat enjoy a wand toy made to flop or a toy that spastically runs on the ground? Does your cat enjoy for you to throw toys or does she like electronic moving toys? Laser pointers can also be fun but have the potential to increase frustration. If you play with a laser pointer, be sure the cat “catches” a real toy at the end of the game.

Consider giving your cat perches in windows where he or she can watch the outdoors. There are even options such as “cat TV.” Search for “videos for cats” on YouTube, and you will find many videos featuring birds, fish, rodents and so on. Give your cat new items to explore every day, such as paper bags and boxes. Rotate toys weekly and hide them in different places to keep them interesting.

There are lots of electronic toys and options on the market to give your cat activities when you are unavailable for play, but nothing can replace the interaction from his/her human family. Cats are highly intelligent and social. Many don't get enough physical or mental stimulation. Consider clicker training with your cat. Teaching a cat tricks is very similar to a dog or other animal once you learn how to motivate your cat. This can be a great way to expend energy and teach your cat appropriate behaviors while having fun together.

Please note that while some cats react positively to catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), some become so worked up when exposed to it that the use of catnip can be detrimental when addressing a behavior problem. Cats under 6 months of age and some adult cats are genetically incapable of responding to the active ingredient in catnip (nepetalactone) and do not react to it at all!

### **OVERSTIMULATION**

Biting and scratching at hands during petting is a common behavior problem reported by cat owners. This often happens because the cat gets too worked up during this interaction. If you have a cat who becomes overstimulated, pet body parts that tend to be calming, such as the cat's head, but avoid their body and tail. Use slow, gentle strokes at a steady pace, as fast or rough petting can be too overstimulating to sensitive cats. Only pet the cat when he/she asks for it by rubbing or head butting you. It's common for a cat to want to snuggle without being stroked. A good rule of thumb for cats that are sensitive to petting is the three-pet rule: When your cat asks for petting, pet three times then stop. Pet again if the cat requests more petting and stop again after three strokes. Repeat until the cat stops asking for pets. This makes it much easier for the cat to communicate if he/she would like to be pet.

Pent-up frustration and lack of physical and mental stimulation can also lead to overstimulated behaviors. This often makes cats more sensitive to physical contact than they would be when calm. Cats do best with slow reintroductions to physical contact once they begin receiving more physical and mental interaction. Think of it as rebuilding tolerance while helping your cat to expel tension in a calm and controlled manner, rather than allowing the tension and excitement to explode as he/she starts to get receive increased attention. Adjust the activities you are offering as appropriate for your individual cat and their tolerance levels.

### **DEFENSIVE BEHAVIOR**

Cats will scratch defensively when in pain or frightened. If your cat is scratching you or another animal and causing injuries, please have them thoroughly checked by your veterinarian and call our behavior helpline at 804-643-7722 or contact a certified cat behavior consultant who can help you identify and address the cause of the issue.

### **RESOURCES**

- <https://m.iaabc.org/consultant/>
- <https://www.petprofessionalguild.com/Zip-Code-Search>
- <https://www.sfspca.org/resource/playing-with-your-cat/>
- <https://www.sfspca.org/resource/mental-enrichment/>
- <https://www.ddfl.org/resource/cat-clicker-training-2/>
- <https://www.ddfl.org/resource/play-with-your-cat/>
- <https://www.ddfl.org/resource/cat-toys-and-how-to-use-them/>
- <https://www.sfspca.org/resource/play-aggression/>
- <https://www.sfspca.org/resource/overstimulation/>
- <https://www.ddfl.org/resource/overstimulated-cats/>
- <https://www.ddfl.org/resource/understanding-cat-aggression-towards-people/>
- <https://www.tuftandpaw.com/blogs/cat-guides/the-definitive-guide-to-cat-behavior-and-body-language>