**Scratching on furniture and carpets**



**Why do cats scratch?**

Cats scratch with their front claws by dragging them downward, either on a horizontal or vertical surface - this action, referred to as stropping, loosens and removes the outer husk of the claw revealing a sharp new surface underneath.

It also exercises the muscles of the forelimbs and spine to keep the cat in tip top condition for hunting. Some cats will scratch by lying down and pulling their bodyweight along the floor. The surfaces chosen are usually fixed and non-yielding to resist the force exerted by the cat.

Scratching is also used as a form of territorial communication or marking behavior. Scent and sweat glands in between the pads of the feet mix to produce a unique smell. When claws are scraped down a surface the scent is deposited and the combination of the mark, discarded claw husks and the smell provides a strong visual and scent message to other cats.

Evidence of scratching outdoors can often be found on trees, fence posts, sheds and wooden gates, for example, all strategically important locations in a cat populated area. Similar surfaces outside will also be utilized for claw maintenance. Unvarnished woods and tree bark are the most natural surfaces to scratch as they provide a perfect level of resistance to the action and show a strong visual cue when used regularly.

**Why does my cat scratch indoors?**

Many cats nowadays have limited or no access to outdoors. There are also those that choose to spend more time in the comfort and safety of the home and just feel more relaxed about maintaining their claws in a secure environment!

Scratching can also be used as a precursor for play or even as an attention seeking tool by the more manipulative and social individuals. Popular substrates indoors include soft woods (e.g. pine), fabrics, textured wallpaper and carpet. Popular locations include doorframes, furniture and stairs.

Cats will often scratch vigorously in the presence of their owners or other cats as a sign of territorial confidence.

**How do I know if the amount of scratching my cat does is normal?**

If the scratched locations are widespread throughout the home, particularly around doorways and windows, then it is likely that your cat is signaling a general sense of insecurity. Whether the scratching represents claw maintenance, marking or both depends on the dynamics of your cat household, the pattern of locations and various other factors. Even if the level of scratching is normal for your cat, if attractive scratching posts or areas are not provided indoors it is likely that damage will occur to furniture, wallpaper or carpet!

**What can I do to stop my cat scratching my furniture and carpets?**

If you have owned your cat from a kitten it is important that it is accustomed to handling and restraint at an early age. If a cat becomes used to claw trimming as a kitten then this will be well tolerated as an adult and will prevent damage to furniture. However this should only be undertaken if your cat is kept exclusively indoors, as it may need those sharp claws for defense against attack and to get out of trouble.

Claw trimming however won’t be the whole answer - if a particular surface or object is being damaged it is important to provide an acceptable alternative that offers a similar experience when used. For example if your cat is scratching textured wallpaper at a certain height it is advisable that the alternative scratching area is vertical with similar texture and striations that allows the cat to stretch to the same level.



Commercially available scratching posts range from a basic single upright structure with a heavy base to an elaborate floor-to-ceiling modular unit that provides many opportunities for play, exercise and resting as well as a variety of surfaces to scratch. In multi-cat households it is advisable to provide one scratching post per cat (plus an additional one for choice) positioned in different locations.

The choice of design depends then on budget and space available. If space is an issue then scratching panels can be fixed to walls, either using homemade or commercially available products. Sections of carpet can be attached to walls using double-sided carpet tape and wooden batons attached at the top and bottom (using rawl plugs and screws) for added security. The carpet chosen to provide a suitable surface for scratching should be a loop-weave to offer the appropriate degree of resistance. It is also essential that it is positioned to allow the cat to scratch at full stretch (remember that kittens grow very quickly so full stretch for them will not be high enough!!).

Commercially available panels of sisal twine bark or corrugated cardboard can also be attached to walls to create a similar scratching area.

Use of [Feliway®](http://www.feliway.co.uk/Unwanted-Cat-Behaviour/How-to-stop-cat-scratching) (manufactured by Ceva Animal Health), can also be beneficial, as this provides a sense of security and reassurance to the cat, making scratching for territorial reasons less likely to occur.

**Frequently asked questions**

**I’ve bought a scratching post, why won’t my cat use it?**

Some scratching products are too lightweight to resist scratching or cannot be fixed to rigid surfaces. These tend not to be favored by cats due to the lack of resistance when used. It is also important initially that the post, scratching panel or modular ‘cat-aerobic' center is located in an area your cat frequents on a regular basis. Placing it in an area that is convenient to you but not visited by your cat will guarantee that it is ignored!

As cats often scratch after a period of sleep it may be useful to place a post near a favorite bed. The type of scratching product chosen should include upright posts that are tall enough to allow the cat to scratch at full stretch.

Some commercially available posts are impregnated with catnip. This is a dried herb that is extremely attractive to many cats and its presence will often draw attention without much effort. Once the cat has approached the scratching post a simple predatory-type game (involving a piece of string attached to a feather, for example) around the base will encourage the claws to make contact with the surfaces. Often this will be sufficient to encourage further visits. If the scratching post has several levels then placing tasty dry food on the modular surfaces may encourage the less playful cat to investigate.

**Scratching posts are covered in carpet, won’t that encourage my cat even more to damage my stairs?**

Although many commercially available scratching posts are covered with carpet there is no evidence that the cat's scratching habits will generalize to other areas of carpet within the home once the post is used regularly.

**I’ve bought a scratching post, my cat uses it but still uses the sofa - what should I do?**

If scratching has damaged furniture, it is possible to deter your cat from future visits to the same location. Low tack double-sided adhesive tape (the adhesive on the tape will attract atmospheric dust and fibers so it may be necessary to place a fresh strip over the original on a daily basis if the cat is persistent.) can be stuck over the area and this will provide an unpleasant (but not dangerous) experience when your cat next scratches there. It is essential to ensure that the tape is not too sticky since it could damage paws and fabric. This method can be employed once there are acceptable scratching posts nearby to use as an alternative. Commercially available double-sided adhesive sheets can be purchased from some household cleaning suppliers specifically for this purpose.

There are various commercial scratching deterrents on the market that can be sprayed on the damaged area to prevent further approaches but they do emit a strong odor that is offensive to humans too and they need to be regularly reapplied to be effective.

**What if my cat is damaging wooden surfaces?**

If wooden furniture, doorframes or banisters have been damaged by scratching it is important to remove all traces of the scratch marks by rubbing down with a fine sand paper and treating the area with a thick layer of furniture polish once the surface is smooth again. Suitable posts or scratching panels should be located nearby. If the area is not ideal for a free-standing scratching post on a permanent basis then it can be relocated slowly (an inch at a time!) to a more convenient position once it is being used regularly.

**What if carpet is damaged?**

Many cats target the lower step on staircases and scratch horizontally whilst lying down. Place low tack double-sided adhesive tape over the damaged areas (warn the family not to tread on it!) and provide a scratching area nearby. If the cat grips the stair on opposite sides of the right angle, providing both vertical and horizontal scratching surfaces, it is important that the alternative offers the same opportunity. For example a breeze block covered in carpet will be heavy enough to resist the pull of the scratching action, can be used for both vertical and horizontal scratching and is easily located nearby.

**What if wallpaper is damaged?**

Thin sheets of Perspex can be cut to size and fitted over the damaged area of wallpaper using screws and rawl plugs if appropriate. This surface will be unattractive to scratch since it is smooth and it is also easily cleaned to remove any scent deposits. Double-sided adhesive tape can also be used over the affected area if the wallpaper is sufficiently damaged to require replacing. Whichever deterrent is used it is essential to provide a vertical scratching panel of a similar height nearby.

**Should I punish my cat for scratching the carpet?**

It's important to remember that your cat is not doing this just to be naughty. If the motivation is claw maintenance then you are punishing a natural behavior (very confusing for the cat) or if your cat is scratching excessively due to anxiety and insecurity then punishment will add to its distress and probably make the situation worse.

**How do I know if my cat’s scratching is anxiety-related?**

If the scratching is widespread, you have a multi-cat household and/or you live in a densely cat-populated territory the scratching may be anxiety-related. Even major building work within your home may trigger intensive scratching as your cat adjusts to its altered territory.

There are often tensions within multi-cat households or territories that are not easily identified by owners. The solution to territorial marking lies in identifying the cause of the individual cat's stress. Once this has been established it may be possible to decrease the cat's anxiety by providing additional resources within the home to prevent competition between members of the group, for example. Making environmental changes within the home will also increase the cat's feelings of security and safety. One way of potentially increasing security is to use synthetic feline pheromones that mimic naturally occurring secretions that all cats produce from glands in their cheeks. Cats use this scent to mark their territory and the smell gives them a sense of security and reassurance. Research has shown that cats will not scratch or spray urine in areas where this pheromone is deposited. A part of this scent is common to all cats and a synthetic version called [Feliway®](http://www.feliway.co.uk/Unwanted-Cat-Behaviour/How-to-stop-cat-scratching) is available in spray and diffuser form (this plugs into an electrical socket).