



# Feline Scratching & Declawing

The following document contains information about why your cat may scratch and solutions for you to prevent scratching of furniture and people. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at **(651) 283-7216** or **housepawsmn@gmail.com**.

## Why do cats scratch?

Scratching is a normal feline behavior. Although scratching helps to shorten and condition the claws, the primary reasons that cats scratch are to mark their territory and to stretch. Some cats may increase their territorial marking (scratching, urine marking, etc.) in situations of anxiety or conflict. Cats may also threaten or play with a swipe of their paws.

For cats that mainly live outdoors, scratching is seldom an issue for owners. Scratching is typically directed at prominent objects like tree trunks and fence posts. Play swatting with other cats will seldom cause injuries because cats have thick skin and coats for protection. When play becomes rough, most cats can sufficiently sort things out between themselves without any intervention. Occasionally, rough play or territorial fighting will lead to injuries or abscesses that require veterinary attention.

Indoor cats may begin to scratch furniture, walls or doors or use their claws to climb drapery. Claws may also injure people when cats become overly playful or do not care for a particular type of handling or restraint. With a good understanding of cat behavior and a bit of effort, it is possible to prevent most clawing problems, even for those cats that live exclusively indoors.

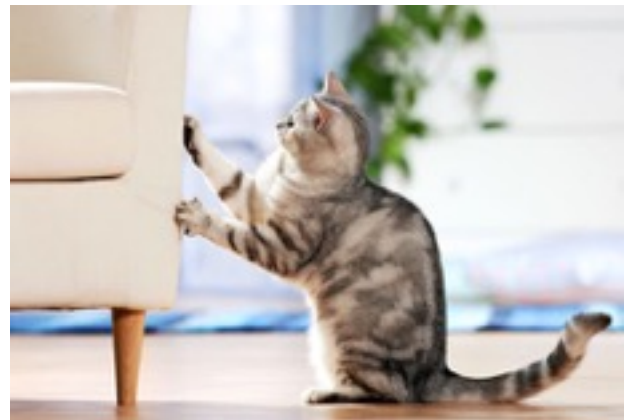


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Outdoor cats may be content to only scratch when outside and will leave indoor walls and furniture intact. Indoor cats usually need an area for indoor scratching, climbing and play.

## How can I stop my cat from scratching?

It is impractical to expect cats to stop scratching entirely. Any cat that spends some or all of its time indoors will have urges to scratch when inside. These cats need an outlet for their scratching and marking behaviors. It is not possible to stop a cat from scratching entirely, but owners can direct the scratching, climbing and play to

appropriate indoor areas. To deal with scratching problems, it is usually adequate to build or purchase a scratching post and provide appropriate play toys.

### How do I create a scratching area for my cat?

Because cats use their scratching posts for marking and stretching, posts should be set up in prominent areas with at least one close to the cat's sleeping quarters. The post should be tall enough for the cat to scratch while standing on hind legs with the forelegs extended. It should be sturdy so that it does not topple when scratched. Some cats prefer a scratching post with a corner so that two sides can be scratched at once, while others may prefer a horizontal scratching post.

Special consideration should be given to the surface texture of the post. Commercial posts are often covered with tightly woven material for durability, but many cats prefer a loosely woven material where the claws can hook and tear during scratching. Remember, scratching is a marking behavior and cats want to leave a visual mark. Carpet may be an acceptable covering but it should be combed first to make sure there are no tight loops. Some cats prefer sisal, a material from an old chair, or even bare wood for scratching. Make sure you use a material that appeals to your cat.

### How can I get my cat to use its post?

A good way to convince a cat to approach and use the post is to turn the scratching area into an interesting and desirable play center. Perches to climb on, space to climb into, and toys mounted on ropes or springs are highly appealing to most cats. Placing a few play toys, cardboard boxes, catnip treats, or even the food bowl in the area should help to keep the cat occupied. Sometimes rubbing the post with tuna oil will increase its attractiveness, or food rewards may be given if the owner observes the cat scratching at its post. Products have been designed to reward the cat automatically by dispensing food rewards each time the cat scratches. It may also be helpful to take the cat to the post, gently rub its paws along the post in a scratching motion, and give it a food reward. This technique should not be attempted if it causes any fear or anxiety.

Placement is important when trying to entice your cat to use a scratching post. Because scratching is also a marking behavior, most cats prefer to use a post that is placed in a prominent location. It may be necessary to place the post in the center of a room or near furniture that the cat has tried to scratch until the cat reliably uses the post. The post may then be moved to a less obtrusive location. For some cats, multiple posts in several locations will be necessary.



Image retrieved from Northern IL Cat Clinic

## What can I do if the cat continues to scratch my furniture?

Despite the best of plans and finest of scratching posts, some cats may continue to scratch or climb in inappropriate areas. In these cases, a little time, effort and ingenuity may be necessary. The first thing to consider is partial confinement or “cat-proofing” your home when you are not around to supervise. If the problem occurs in a few rooms, consider making those rooms out-of-bounds by closing off a few doors or by using child-proofing techniques such as child locks or barricades. The cat may even have to be kept in a single room that has been effectively cat-proofed when the owner is unable to supervise it. The cat’s scratching post, play center, toys and litter box should be located in this cat-proof room.

If cat-proofing is not possible or the cat continues to use one or two pieces of furniture, you might want to consider moving the furniture or placing a scratching post directly in front of the furniture that is being scratched. Ensure that the surface of the post is covered with a material similar to that for which the cat has shown a preference. Some scratching posts are even designed to be wall-mounted or hung on doors. Placing additional scratching posts in strategic areas may also be helpful for some cats, and keeping the cat’s nails properly trimmed is a useful technique.



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icatcare.org

## How do I punish my cat for inappropriate scratching?

Avoid any form of physical punishment, because these cause fear or aggression towards owners. With physical punishment, the cat will only learn to stop scratching if the owner is around.

Indirect, non-physical forms of punishment are useful if the owner can remain out of sight while administering the punishment. In this way, the cat will learn that scratching is unpleasant even when the owner is not present. Water rifles, ultrasonic or audible alarms, or remote-controlled devices are sometimes helpful.

Generally, the best deterrents are those that train the pet not to scratch, even in the owner’s absence. If the surface or area can be made less appealing or unpleasant, the cat will likely seek out a new area or target for scratching (ideally, this will be its scratching post). The simplest approach is to cover the scratched surface with a less appealing material, such as plastic, a loosely draped piece of cloth, aluminum foil, or double-sided tape. Another effective deterrent is to booby trap problem areas so that either scratching or approaching the area is unpleasant for the cat (eg. motion detectors or a stack of plastic cups that is set to topple when the cat scratches). Neither remote punishment nor booby traps will successfully deter inappropriate scratching unless the cat has an alternative scratching area that is comfortable, appealing, well-located and free of all deterrents.

## When should declawing be considered?

Declawing is a drastic but permanent solution for scratching problems, but for most households the previously-discussed techniques are successful. There are some homes where declawing may be the only option if the pet is to be kept. In one study, it was estimated that as many as 50% of cat owners who declawed their cats would not have otherwise kept the cat. This might be the case where the cat continues to damage the furniture or cause injuries to people during play or handling. Even the slightest scratch could have consequences such as cat scratch fever, especially when a member of the household suffers from a seriously debilitating disease. In some cases, the issue comes down to whether the owner should be able to keep the cat and have it declawed, or whether it should be removed from the home. Although it has been estimated that approximately 25% of cats are declawed in North America, declawing is illegal in many countries.

## What is the effect of declawing on the cat?

Many authors have written of dire behavioral and surgical complications of declawing, but these reports are based on myths and anecdotes. More recently, a number of veterinary behaviorists and pet psychologists have studied the effects of declawing on the cat, the owner and the cat-owner relationship. At least 10 scientific studies have examined the consequences of declawing on the pet and its relationship with its owners. These studies show that declawing does not alter the cat's behavior. In fact, some cats may continue to scratch furniture after declawing but cause no damage. There is no increase in behavior problems with declawed cats, and declawed cats are not at greater risk of getting bitten or injured in cat fights. The only recognized concern is a few days of post-surgical discomfort. Be certain to discuss pain management options with our veterinarian prior to surgery.

When owners of declawed cats were asked to assess the effects of declawing on the cat-owner relationship, declawing always met or surpassed their expectations, and over 70% indicated an improvement in their relationship with their cat. Declawing allows people to keep their cat and stop any household damage. Normally, only the front claws need to be removed to prevent furniture damage.

## What is a tendonectomy and how does it compare to declawing?

Another surgery to reduce scratching is a digital flexor tendonectomy, which cuts the tendon on each claw so that it cannot be used for scratching. This surgery resulted in less post-operative pain for the first two days in comparison to declawing. However, after the tendonectomy you will still need to regularly trim your cat's nails as they continue to grow. The cat's claws may also still catch on furniture because they will no longer be conditioned and worn down by scratching. With special attention to pain management, declawing may be the preferable surgery for owners who cannot properly maintain their cat's nails.