

CAT 20

Scratching and clawing in the house



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Scratching and clawing in the house

Some cats may tear chair arms with their claws, scratch patches of wallpaper off the wall or shred carpets. Most cats do not cause this type of damage, so why do others feel the need to behave like this in our homes?

Scratching has several functions – one of the most important being to keep a cat's hunting weapons sharp. Scratching also leaves scent marks in a territory. Secretions of watery sweat from between the cat's pads leave a scent message in addition to the physical marks.

Cats usually scratch outdoors, choosing trees or posts. Wood is just the right texture to allow claws to dig in and be drawn down, pulling off the old claw sheath to reveal the sharp point of the new one. If you look at a regular scratching place you will find these pieces of sheath embedded in the surface.

Why do cats scratch inside our homes as well as outdoors?

There could be several reasons. Finding why the cat is scratching will help you to decide on a solution.

Exercising the claws

Indoor cats with no access outdoors still need to perform this natural behaviour. If nothing suitable is provided, they find something in the house that has an appropriate surface.

In the wild, a cat's claws are an excellent climbing aid as well as a hunting tool. Keeping them sharp is obviously essential but this can cause a problem if it is undertaken indoors instead of out.

Habit or enjoyment

Some cats may have developed the habit of sharpening their claws indoors. Others enjoy the texture of carpets or furniture coverings and the shape of furniture may make it inviting as a scratch point. Some cats seem to enjoy the act of scratching and it can sometimes be a precursor to, or part of, excited play.

Boredom or curiosity

A fascination with wallpaper may occur after a loose piece encourages play, or an accidental grab at the wall results in an exciting game of paper removal with the bonus of chasing all the little pieces that fall off. It may have the additional benefit that the owners suddenly start to take notice and give the cat attention, albeit angry attention.

Communication with other cats

Some cats will scratch more when in the presence of other cats. Exactly what they are trying to convey is not well understood, but this type of scratching may be done as a display and to leave a scent mark to communicate with other cats in the vicinity.

Increasing their feeling of security

When cats feel vulnerable, they will try to rub their own scent on prominent places in a room to feel more secure. While they may not resort to spraying (using urine as a scent mark), they may use the scents produced by scratching

to do this instead. If the cat is trying to increase feelings of security, many surfaces may be scratched, particularly those in strategic places such as edges of chairs which are nearest to doorways.

What can you do?

Do not blame the cat

Firstly, realise that the cat is not doing this out of spite or in an attempt to cause destruction on purpose.

Provide a scratching post

It is important to provide an outlet for claw sharpening in the form of a scratch post, especially if your cat is an indoor cat, or has got into the habit of sharpening their claws inside the house.

Place the post in front of the damaged area, gently wipe the cat's paws down the post to leave some scent on it and show the cat what to do. Do this several times when the post is new. If you catch your cat in the act of scratching elsewhere, carry the cat to the post and encourage the animal to scratch there instead. You can also encourage your cat to use the post by sprinkling cat nip on it, or attaching a toy or feathers to the top of the post.

Provide enough exercise

If curiosity or the satisfaction of clawing soft furnishings is encouraging the cat to use that area, you will need to

find another outlet for the cat's energies. Try playing with your cat more regularly, little and often throughout the day, providing toys which offer an outlet for hunting abilities.

If your cat attacks the wallpaper, you can try changing the type of paper you use (cats seem to prefer paper which has a raised texture) or painting the area instead. Do not encourage this behaviour by giving the cat attention when you find them scratching.

Improve security

Where scratching occurs at many sites, it can be a form of marking behaviour and a sign that the cat may be feeling insecure. The solution will rely on identifying the cause of this stress or insecurity. Possible causes are strange cats coming into the house, conflict between resident cats, changes within the household, or fear of something outside.



You may be able to help your cat feel more confident by:

- closing the cat flap and letting the cat in and out yourself – or fitting a selective type which keeps strange cats out
- looking carefully at relationships between cats – providing some resting places high up to let the cat relax whilst still being able to watch what is going on will improve security
- restricting your cat's access within the house and concentrating on making the cat feel secure in one or two rooms
- using your cat's own scent to make the cat feel more secure. Cats use their cheek glands to mark their territory and the presence of these scents will make them feel relaxed. You can help spread scent by taking a soft cloth and wiping it around your cat's face. Dab the cloth around the room where you have seen your cat rubbing and where the cat scratches (there are also manufactured scents available which work in the same way – ask your vet for details).
- never punish your cat as this will make them feel even more insecure. You should be viewed as a source of security by your cat, rather than as an additional threat.

Nervous cats are likely to find any new challenge threatening. When we redecorate our homes or replace our furniture, we inadvertently remove all the scents which have made the cat feel secure. We then replace them with strong smelling carpets, suites, paint, cleaning fluids etc which can be quite disturbing to a scent oriented cat. When redecorating, it may be worth keeping your cat out of the new room for a while until the new smells have mingled with other familiar smells in the house, and you have helped replace your cat's own scent using the method given above.

Cleaning scratched areas

If scratching is used as a form of marking territory, then the cat will be attracted back to the spot to top up the marks as the scent wears off. If this is an area where you want to stop the cat scratching and the surface is cleanable, then it can be useful to try to remove the smell as much as possible. This can be done using a mild solution of a biological washing powder and then scrubbing with surgical spirit (check that this will not remove colour from fabrics).

Keep your cat away from the area until it is dry. Keeping the cat away for as long as possible will also help to break the habit and let smells dissipate. You can then dab some cheek scents on the broader area to help the cat feel relaxed.

Happy, healthy pets

Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at www.bluecross.org.uk

Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
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- pets needing new homes

Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.



Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk



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