

Destructive Cats

Most cats, especially young kittens, have a strong, natural desire to play and explore. But this desire can lead to major problems when your cat claws your sofa or destroys your houseplants. The best way to prevent destructive scratching is by providing an environment that meets your cat's needs.

Exploration and play

The first consideration is to provide a safe, stimulating environment. Cat-proof your home and build a play center where your cat can climb, perch and scratch. Provide a few toys your cat can bat around, such as spring-mounted, dangling or bouncy toys. Some cats enjoy climbing into empty cardboard boxes or cat carriers, especially if food treats have been left inside. Ping-Pong balls and walnuts make inexpensive toys that may cats love. Cats may even find some dog chew toys appealing. Avoid tempting your kitten into play by teasing it with your fingers- you may end up with a play-biting cat.

Indoor cats with little access to grass or other vegetable matter may chew houseplants. Offer them lettuce, catnip or a kitty herb garden in exchange. Some cats are more likely to suck or chew on material such as rugs or clothing. You can correct the problem by keeping these objects away from your cat, providing alternative chew toys, or changing its diet to dry, bulky food.

Preventing problems

To keep your cat away from problem areas, first try child locks, barricades or closed doors. For persistent problems or areas that cannot be barricaded, use remote punishment, taste and odor aversion or booby traps as deterrents. Never use physical punishment- it may cause your cat to fear you and to avoid the problem area only when you are around. If you can remain out of sight and use remote punishment, your cat should learn without fearing you. Use a water gun or loud noise to stop the behavior. Destructive chewing can be discouraged by using commercial anti-chew sprays, mentholated products, vinegar or a little cayenne pepper mixed with water. Other options include aversive odors (perfume, deodorant soap, citrus oil) or booby traps (motion-activated alarms or a stack of plastic cups set up to topple when the cat enters the area or scratches). You shouldn't punish your cat unless you have provided an alternate scratching area for it and have rewarded it for scratching there.

Scratching

Scratching is a normal behavior that allows your cat to condition its claws and mark its territory. It also provides a nice stretch. Of course, when your cat's scratching is on furniture or your favorite stereo speakers, it quickly becomes intolerable.

To prevent destructive scratching, keep your cat away from tempting areas, trim its nails regularly and provide a proper scratching post. Encourage our cat to use a scratching post by placing one near its favorite sleeping area and perhaps a second post in a prominent area. It is important to select surface textures that are both practical and appealing to the cat- carpet, sisal, a nubby fabric or even bare wood. Attract your cat to the scratching post by attaching a few toys, rubbing a little catnip into the surface or providing a more elaborate structure with climbing and perching areas. Give your cat a food reward whenever it approaches its post, and multiple rewards whenever it actually scratches the post. If you prefer to build your own scratching post, ensure that the post is tall enough for your cat to scratch with its legs fully extended and is sturdy enough to support your cat's weight without toppling. You can leave the wood bare or cover it with a suitable surface covering. You can construct an inexpensive scratching post by securely attaching a fireplace log to a plywood base.

Persistent problems

If your cat continues to scratch in an inappropriate area, put a post there. Food rewards will keep your cat interested in the post and away from your furniture. If destructive scratching persists, cover the scratched area with plastic, a loosely draped piece of material or short strips of double-sided tape. Another option is to use plastic coverings that fit over your cat's nails. These are available from your veterinarian.

If you have sincerely tried to solve the problem but still encounter destructive scratching, declawing may be a final consideration. It is certainly a better alternative than banning your cat to the outdoors or taking it to an animal shelter (which may be unable to place the cat in another home). Numerous studies have shown that declawing does not have a detrimental effect on a cat's behavior or personality.