

# A Behavioral Alternative to Cat Declawing

Posted by Katya on March 14th, 2011



*This post is brought to Adopt-a-Pet.com by Dr. Rolan Tripp. Dr. Tripp received his doctorate from UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine and also holds a bachelor's degree in music and a minor in philosophy. A regular guest on the Animal Planet Network, Dr. Tripp appears on both "Petsburgh, USA" and "Good Dog U." Cat clawing of objects is a normal behavior that serves a variety of feline needs. The term "sharpening claws" is misleading because the objective is to remove an old claw sheath the way a snake sheds its outgrown skin. The back paw sheaths are removed by chewing. Another natural reason for cats to scratch is to leave a visual and olfactory territorial marker. In the wild, claw-roughened bark is visible from a distance. A feline intruder might then explore the visible marks, and while sniffing, discover the pheromone scent left from the sweat glands in the pads.*

The process of clawing is also used to condition and stretch leg and back muscles. For housebound cats experiencing boredom or exercise frustration, clawing is an activity that works off excess energy. There is probably an individual variation in genetic tendency to claw objects because some cats just seem to enjoy the activity regardless of physiological function.

## Diagnosis, Prognosis, and Treatment Overview

The first step in controlling destructive feline clawing is to realize that physical punishment such as spanking, shaking, and scolding is unlikely to correct the problem, but very likely to damage the cat's bond with the owner. Further, the cat simply learns to scratch out of sight.

The preferred alternative is a detailed behavioral evaluation to diagnose the underlying motivation. A behavioral diary should document the actual frequency, duration, intensity, triggers, and targets. This diary can be used both for diagnosis and to monitor progress later. The prognosis is related to the number of motivations, total duration, frequency, intensity, environment, and genetic predisposition.

A behavior treatment plan should address each component motivation. Finally, it is important to understand that the goal is not to stop clawing altogether, but to redirect it to an acceptable substrate. For simplicity, the motivations below will be divided into claw maintenance, stress response, and genetic predisposition.

## Claw Maintenance

The first step should be to provide for the cat's physiological needs. One option is to trim the cat's nails, then apply a plastic claw cap. An alternative is temporary confinement and claw substrate preference testing. This has the added advantage of immediately limiting the options for destruction.

If available, confine with a familiar cat known to be an appropriate clawer to facilitate observational learning, and decrease emotional isolation. The duration of the confinement is limited to that necessary to identify the problem cat's claw target preferences. Many pet stores will give refunds for unused products, so the goal is to provide many claw target options, and return for credit the options not used. The most common substrates are carpet, rope, bark, cardboard, or fireplace log. Of the types of carpet, most cats prefer longitudinal instead of lateral weave orientation to facilitate claw sheath removal.

The scratching post height should be sufficient for the cat to stretch, so at least one tall "cat tree" is indicated during testing. Include the currently owned most-used scratching post since cats like to return to a familiar object. Owners often ironically discard an unsightly heavily used scratching post which is the most attractive to the cat. Include both flat on the floor, as well as vertical options such as floor posts or hanging from a door handle. The cat can be gently placed on the post so it is necessary for the cat to use its claws for support, and this introduces the substrate for future use.

Once the preferred object and substrate is determined, the next goal is to determine house locations, then encourage use of these acceptable claw targets. Good locations include near where the cat commonly rests (close for stretching), eats, eliminates, and near any exit door. The most important location is immediately adjacent to a previously used inappropriate target. If used, the new post can be moved 3-6 inches per day. If attractive to the cat, a toy can be placed at the top of the post and catnip can be rubbed into the surface. Verbal praise is indicated, as well as food treats after use if observed by the owner.

The final step is to make the inappropriate targets unattractive. If observed in the act, an air-horn or water spray can be effective if the cat does not associate it with the owner. Anonymity can be facilitated by remote controlled booby traps such as power control of an alarm clock, hair dryer, or tape recording. Other options include a motion detector, double-sided tape, and upside down mouse trap or carpet runner.

## Stress Related Clawing

If the cat frequently exhibits anxious body postures, and if the destructive clawing intensity and frequency is beyond that required for normal claw maintenance then a diagnosis of "Stress Related Clawing" may be considered.

One possibility is social stress such as seeing a cat outdoors, a new house cat, or an existing cat that exhibits antagonistic behaviors. There may be intercat social issues about status, indoor territory, or new objects. A second possibility is environmental stress such as construction, redecoration, and human family conflicts or schedule changes. Many young healthy indoor cats probably experience exercise frustration and/or boredom stress. Rhythmic activity is a known stress reliever.

Solutions for these stress influencers are blocking outdoor views, environmental enrichment, increased play, or controlled outdoor excursions. Many types of feline stress are helped by a feline pheromone diffuser. Intercat social stress is more complex requiring assistance from an animal behavior consultant and possible pharmacologic intervention.

## Genetic Predisposition

In the author's opinion, there are three indications of genetic predisposition: 1) if the behavior is observed in close relatives; 2) if observed from early in life; or 3) if all other motivations have been excluded. A genetic predisposition worsens the prognosis. The treatment strategy becomes: focus on other motivations that can be influenced, increase the number of acceptable options, and provide high rewards for appropriate clawing.

Even those governments who outlaw surgical declawing typically include a clause, "except when necessary for a therapeutic purpose." As a final alternative to euthanasia, some cats adapt to indoor confinement in a 3x4x4 foot "Kitty Kondo" pen as long as they have sufficient supervised play, exercise, and affection time outside the pen from the people in the house – and a place to claw.