

# Feline Behavior Problems: Destructive Behavior

Many owners complain that their cats scratch furniture and carpets, chew on fabric, or munch on houseplants. These are considered destructive behaviors, which can not only result in the loss of valuable items, but can also be harmful to the health of your cat. One common misconception is that cats are "out for revenge" when they destroy household items. But actually, these innate behaviors occur throughout the course of a cat's normal investigation and play. The good news is that they can be managed.

## SCRATCHING

### Why do cats scratch?

Cats that scratch your favorite sofa or expensive drapes are not on a mission to destroy your home, but rather to satisfy certain innate needs. Scratching is a marking behavior; it allows the deposition of scent from special glands on the cat's paws. It also removes the translucent covering, or sheath, over the claws. The scratch marks, along with the claw sheaths left behind, may also serve as displays of confidence.

### How can I stop my cat from scratching?

Because it is an innate behavior, scratching is difficult to stop or even curb. It is like trying to stop a cat from grooming, or burying its waste. However, cats can be taught to scratch on more appropriate objects like scratching posts and tree stumps. The following three tactics will help you redirect your cat's scratching behavior:

#### *1. Identify your cat's scratching preferences*

To find out what your cat likes best to scratch on, observe her carefully. Does your cat prefer to scratch on carpets, drapes, wood, or some other surface? Does she scratch vertically, with her paws stretched out above her head, or does she prefer horizontal surfaces? Once you have figured out your cat's preferred scratching materials and orientation, you will be better equipped to buy a scratching post that suits her needs.

#### *2. Provide items that match these preferences*

Scratching posts of all shapes, sizes, and textures are available at most pet stores. If your cat likes to scratch on carpets, a carpet-covered post would be a good choice. But if your cat prefers couches and other nubby surfaces, a post covered in sisal or some other rope-like material might be your best bet.

The scratching post should also match your cat's preferred orientation for scratching. A cat that climbs and scratches on drapes would probably prefer a post tall enough for a long stretch, such as those that mount on a wall or door. However, a cat that likes the horizontal motion of scratching on a carpet might be more likely to use a flattened cardboard box, or a log placed on its side.

Some owners get creative and build their own scratching posts and kitty activity centers. You can cover pieces of wood with carpet, fabric, sisal, or other materials, then nail them together to create a "cat tree" with climbing perches. This will help keep your cat entertained and satisfy her need to scratch. Any scratching post you buy or build should be sturdy enough so that it does not topple over when your cat uses it, and should be at least as tall as your cat standing on her hind legs with her front legs outstretched.

The proper placement of the scratching post is an important part of redirecting your cat's scratching behavior. Place the post next to an area your cat likes to scratch. It can then be moved gradually to a location of your choice as your cat develops acceptable scratching habits. If your cat scratches in several locations, provide a post near each of these.

Take your cat to the new scratching post, and reward her with treats, strokes, and praise for using it. Some posts come with toys attached. You can also place food treats or catnip on top of or around the post as an added enticement. Once you get your cat to use a scratching post, do not discard it when it looks ragged and worn—that means the post is well used and serving its intended purpose!

#### *3. Make unacceptable items unavailable or less attractive to your cat*

The only guaranteed way to stop your cat from scratching a given area or object is to block her access to it. Closing doors may be the simplest solution. However, if this is not practical, there are booby traps you can set up to discourage scratching. A tower of plastic cups that topples over when bumped can be placed in front of scratchable items to startle your cat whenever she begins to scratch. Items covered with blankets, sheets of plastic, or double-sided tape also hinders scratching behavior. A more expensive tactic is to purchase an indoor fence that delivers mild, harmless shock when your cat crosses a given boundary.

Because scratching has a scent-marking component, cats are more likely to re-scratch areas that already have their scent. To help break this cycle, try using an odor neutralizer to deodorize areas where your cat has previously scratched.

In addition to altering the accessibility, appearance, or scent of household items, you can further minimize scratching damage by regularly trimming your cat's nails. Also available are plastic claw caps, or sheaths, that can be glued over your cat's claws. These should only be applied to cats that allow you to handle and manipulate their paws. While wearing these sheaths, your cat is able to go through the motions of scratching, but because the claws are hidden, no damage is done. The sheaths need to be replaced every six to 12 weeks.

Declawing, or permanent removal of the claws, should be considered only as a last resort when the above strategies have been unsuccessful, and in cases where a cat's scratching would otherwise necessitate its removal from your home. Declawing will not curb your cat's desire to scratch, but will prevent scratching damage. Declawed cats should never be allowed outside, as they are less able to climb trees or defend themselves. Talk to your veterinarian to determine whether this procedure is right for your cat.

#### *4. Does punishment teach a cat to stop scratching?*

In general, cats do not respond well to punishment, because they see no link between the punishment and their "crime." The only thing punishment does is teach your cat to fear you. Worse, it may lead to aggression. Yelling, squirting a water gun, or startling your cat with a loud noise when he scratches the couch teaches him that your presence, rather than the act of scratching, brings punishment. If your cat is punished for scratching only when you are present, he will simply learn to scratch when you are not there. More effective deterrents to scratching—such as the "tower of cups" booby trap mentioned earlier—are consistent and immediate.

#### **Fabric Chewing and Sucking**

Fabric chewing and sucking is relatively rare in cats. Some speculate that it is a comfort-seeking behavior, or that it fulfills a desire to play and investigate. It is perfectly normal for kittens to chew as they explore, and although many grow out of this behavior, some exhibit it for life. Fabric chewing and sucking—wool often being the fabric of choice—is most commonly seen in Burmese and Siamese cats. This suggests a genetic predisposition comparable to obsessive-compulsive disorders in humans.

A cat with a serious chewing habit can destroy sweaters, socks, blankets, pillows, and other valuable items. But this behavior is even more important to recognize because it can be harmful to your cat's health. Obstruction of the gastrointestinal tract with bits of swallowed fabric can be life threatening. In addition, cats that chew on fabric may also chew on dangerous items like electrical cords, twist ties, or even pins and needles.

#### **How do I get my cat to stop chewing on fabrics?**

You may have to simply hide all valuable and/or dangerous chewable objects, and leave out a few non-valuable fabrics for your cat to chew on—so long as he does not swallow too much of it. You can also try offering your cat alternative items to chew on. Rubber dog toys spread with fish oil, a well-cooked chicken wing or other bone with some meat on it, or even dry cat food can safely satisfy the need to chew.

A cat that habitually chews on inappropriate objects like fabric may need other outlets in order to fulfill unmet needs. A home-built or purchased "kitty condo" with crawl spaces, perches, hanging catnip toys, and other diversions will help occupy your cat's time. Additionally, try to increase the amount of time you spend playing with him. Dangling ribbons, or tossing walnuts or ping-pong balls for your cat to chase are great ways to engage him and provide him with some exercise. You can help meet your cat's need to forage by putting a large ball in the food bowl, or by providing toys that deliver treats when moved or scratched.

Spraying bad-tasting commercial pet repellents on preferred fabrics can also deter chewing. It is best to rotate the positions and types of items sprayed so your cat learns that all fabric tastes bad. Because your cat should not be able to predict by smelling which items are sprayed, the repellent you use should not have a foul odor. Finally, in severe cases, your veterinarian may prescribe medications that decrease your cat's desire to chew or suck. However, the medicine will not affect your cat's ability to do so.

#### **Houseplant Chewing**

Cats that chew on houseplants are usually indoor cats with little access to grass or other greens. Cats may chew on plants as part of their normal investigation and play, or they may simply be craving vegetable matter in their diets. While most plants are harmless, several can be deadly. These include:

Caladium (Caladium spp.)  
Dumb cane (Dieffenbachia spp.)  
English ivy (Hedera helix)  
Lilies (Lilium spp.)  
Mistletoe (Phoradendron spp.)  
Oleander (Nerium oleander)  
Philodendron (Philodendron spp.)

Please be aware that this is not a complete list of poisonous plants. Consult your veterinarian or local poison control center for more information.

The only way to guarantee protection for both your houseplants and your cat is to deny your cat access to the plants. If your cat craves vegetable matter in her diet, you can provide alternative plants for her to munch-although she may still continue to snack on yours. Oat grass, catnip, and catmint are all safe and enjoyable for your cat to eat. You can also try adding lettuce or parsley to her food bowl. Switching to a [cat food](#) with a higher fiber content may help meet her needs as well.

Houseplants can be made less attractive to your cat by spraying the leaves with water, then sprinkling them with cayenne pepper. Spraying with a commercial pet repellent serves a similar purpose. The odor of mothballs in the soil may keep your cat away as well. The previously described "tower of cups" booby trap can also be placed around a plant pot to startle your cat when she begins to chew.

#### **Conclusion**

It is unfortunate that some innate, normal cat behaviors happen to be destructive within the confines of a house. As cat owners, we need to find a balance between protecting both our valuables and our cats' health, and satisfying our cats' needs. Together with your veterinarian, you can devise management strategies that will enable you and your cat to live in peace and good health.

*This brochure was prepared by the American Association of Feline Practitioners and the Cornell Feline Health Center, Cornell University, College of Veterinary Medicine, Ithaca, New York 14853-6401. The center is committed to improving the health of cats by developing methods to prevent or cure feline diseases and by providing continuing education to veterinarians and cat owners. Much of that work is made possible by the financial support of friends. ©2002 by Cornell University. All rights reserved. Cornell University is an equal opportunity, affirmative action educator and employer.*