

Train your cat to scratch where you want

Posted by Jennifer on April 12th, 2011



Cats have a natural need to scratch. The safest place for your cat to live is inside your home – so you need to give them several of desirable surfaces to scratch on, or they are very likely to choose their own – and your couch! You also need to train them to scratch only where you want. If they are not yet trained, you'll need to remove or cover surfaces they might or have already started scratching on where you don't want them to continue. You can use double-sided sticky tape safely on most surfaces (spot test a small non-visible area first), tin foil, or you may need to take down the curtains and put a plastic tarp over your lazy-boy chair while you're in training! Here are the steps to follow to scratch train your cat:

Supplies: buy or build two or more scratching posts. Posts should be sturdy and tall enough to allow the cat to completely stretch – the best ones are 3 feet or taller. A bark-covered log, a post covered with sisal, or a tightly woven burlap-covered post work well. So do the cardboard or sisal scratchers available in pet retail stores. (There's a good selection of cat scratchers at PetSmart.com.) If you use carpet, secure it to the posts with the rough backing on the outside; soft carpeting will not typically satisfy a cat's need to claw. Soft, fluffy, carpeted scratching posts rarely work, and they are one of the greatest causes of declawing – which is painful & inhumane – because cats often don't like the posts.

Positioning: Place one scratching post where the cat is already clawing or likely to claw, such as the side of the couch, and another close to where he or she normally sleeps (cats like to stretch and scratch when they first wake up). Another option is the cardboard or sisal "scratching box," which lies flat on the floor. These are inexpensive and small enough to scatter around the house, allowing your cat easy access to an "approved" scratching spot at all times. They do wear out fairly quickly, however, and will need to be replaced every few months — otherwise, cats may get frustrated and revert back to using furniture.

Training: Next, give your cat specific instructions as to where to claw and where not to claw. Place your cat on the new scratching post and move his or her paws, or pretend to scratch it yourself. This will scent the posts and encourage exploratory clawing. Make the post a "fun" place to be. Play games with your cat on and around the post and

attach hanging strings, balls and/or bouncy wire toys to it. Sprinkle catnip on the post, too. (A once-a-week or so “refresher” application will keep your cat interested.)

When kitty uses the post, reinforce this behavior with praise, but be careful not to startle or frighten him or her.

When the cat claws furniture, never discourage them with physical force. You can calmly spray room temperature water from a squirt gun or spray bottle directed right next to the cat. The spray sound which is like a cat hiss and the water landing near them should be adverse enough (without being cruel) to make scratching their post what they choose the next time they want to scratch.

Some household items are just too tempting for a cat. You wouldn't leave a hamburger out in the middle of your living room floor and expect a dog not to eat it! You may need to donate that wicker hamper to a charity, or put it in the closet with the door closed.

During the training period, you may need to cover upholstery with plastic, double sided tape, tin foil, or other protection. Cats don't like the slippery/sticky feel and will stay away.

Nail Caps: Another option (and good for while they are learning) are nail caps for cats, available at most pet supply stores – [online here](#). Nail caps are soft, vinyl nail caps that are applied to cats' newly trimmed nails. The nail caps allow cats to scratch naturally, without harming furniture. Each application lasts about four to six weeks. Some cats take a bit to get used to them (it can take several applications) but most don't even act like they notice they are on, and you can use the clear kind, or have fun with colors!

Our final advice: Supervision and repetition are key. Supervise your cat so you can play with her when she's on the scratching post, and deter her if she starts scratching something she shouldn't. Repeat as often as possible! This is the most reliable way we know to train your cat to scratch where you want.