



Timpanogos  
animal hospital

# PREVENTING FURNITURE SCRATCHING

## WHY DO CATS SCRATCH?

Scratching is a natural feline behavior. Cats scratch, partly, to remove the sheaths from their claws. Cats that have their nails trimmed regularly are easier to handle and tend to have fewer behavior problems associated with scratching.

Scratching is also a behavior that helps cats interact socially. Cats have glands between their toes, and by vigorously scratching they leave both visual (claw marks and sheath fragments) and scent markers of their presence.

## WAYS TO CONTROL SCRATCHING

✓ Provide a scratching post and positive reinforcement.

You can teach your cat to keep his claws retracted by discouraging him from jumping on dragged clothing, shoelaces, skirts, or pant legs. If your cat is not allowed to use its claws on any of these fabrics, he may not develop inappropriate scratching behaviors.

Teach your cat to use a scratching post. This requires directing and awarding appropriate behaviors with praise and treats and immediately correcting him if he scratches an inappropriate surface. Some cats will use a scratching post immediately; others may take awhile, or may never use one at all. Make the scratching post from fabric, hemp, or sandpaper. Many cats prefer the bark from logs. If you have the room, a dead tree stump can be a nice scratching post. To direct the scratching behavior, first place the cat next to the scratching post and allow him to sniff and explore the area. Next, pull the cat's paws over the surface so he knows that this is an acceptable activity. As you manipulate the paws over the surface, give your cat praise and a food treat. This does not teach a cat to scratch, but rather rewards him for scratching in a specific, acceptable area. If your cat has already shows a preference for a scratching surface (ie your new leather furniture), not the type of surface he prefers and try to cover the scratching post with a similar fabric. Besides the type of fabric your cat prefers, identify the location and other characteristics of his preferred scratching area. These characteristics may include whether the area is vertical or horizontal, dark or light, secluded or open. Provide a scratching post that mimics these characteristics. With an appealing post and proper reinforcement, a cat should switch to the appropriate scratching area.

If your cat continues to return to inappropriate areas to scratch, try startle techniques and booby traps to correct the behavior. Place a bell on your cat's collar to monitor his location and movements. As soon as you hear the bell jingling in an inappropriate areas, startle your cat by speaking sharply to him. Startling should occur a few seconds after scratching begins or within 60 seconds of the onset of behaviors that lead to scratching (e.g. lowering the head, sniffing, rubbing). If your cat does not react to a voice, try using a water gun, air horn, air canister, or fog horn to startle him. It is critical that he not associate you with the punishment, otherwise your cat will become more secretive in his behavior to avoid you. Never use physical punishment (ie hitting) on your cat.

If your cat scratches when you are away, try to restrict his access to inappropriate area by closing doors or using baby gates. If you cannot limit access to the area, try booby-trapping the area. For example, try hanging pull-string firecrackers from the object the cat scratches. If the cat scratches one of these, the firecracker pops and sprays the cat with confetti. You can also try attaching small, inflated balloons to the object. When the cat punctures the balloon, he is startled enough to stop the behavior. The key is to be consistent.

✓ Consider Onychectomy (declawing)

If a scratching post and behavior modification techniques are unsuccessful, declawing is a possible option. Declawing is a serious and painful surgery and should be considered after attempting to modify behavior with a scratching post. At Timpanogos Animal Hospital we use a laser to remove the claws from the front feet. This method helps to decrease some of the pain associated with the procedure and also helps to make recovery easier for the patient. Pain control is essential during and after the procedure. If you have questions concerning declawing, please ask one of our health care team members.

✓ Apply plastic nail sheaths

If you do not wish to declaw your cat and other techniques have been unsuccessful, plastic nail sheaths (Soft Paws) are an option. The sheaths are applied with a permanent glue and must be reapplied every six to 12 weeks as a cat's nails grow. Your cat will still scratch, but unless the fabric is very fine, it will not be damaged by the plastic sheath.

Taken from Karen L. Overall