Scratching on Furniture: A Common Behavior Even in Declawed Cats

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Q. My cat scratches on my furniture a lot. Why does she do this and what can I do to stop it?

A. Cats 'scratch' on items for two reasons. The reason we think of most often is to sharpen their claws. But scratching also serves another purpose. When scratching on items such as furniture or scratching posts, cats are also leaving scent from the sweat glands on the pads of their paws and between the pads. The scent left behind says, 'I was here, and this is my territory.' Once their scent is on an object, they often return to the object and apply their scent again.

We can use this information to our advantage when trying to get a cat to use a scratching post. If we can get a cat's scent on the post (put a little catnip on the post to get the cat to scratch), the cat will likely come back to the post to replenish his scent. Similarly, it is helpful to remove the cat's scent from objects the cat has been scratching on but we wish he wasn't.

If you have a cat that scratches carpeting and furniture, here is what we recommend:

Get a scratching post

You cannot prevent your cat from scratching, but you can train her to scratch only in certain areas. A scratching post or even furniture with scratching areas will give your cat the alternative place to scratch. Cats scratch most frequently right after waking so it is critical that the scratching post is convenient to where they spend much of their time.

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Try different kinds of scratching posts

Some cats prefer real wood posts and will not touch rope sisal posts. Others prefer cardboard, and still others, carpeted posts. Find out which kind your cat prefers and then spray with a catnip spray or keep a catnip toy nearby.

Clean with an enzyme odor remover

If your cat has already scratched your furniture, use an enzyme cleaner to eliminate the cat's scent which it will return to. Then spray daily with one of the products designed to keep pets away by leaving an odor they prefer not to be around (but is OK for you). Citronella sprays are a good first start.

Positive reinforcement and praise

Finally, show your cat how to use her scratching post and praise or give your kitty special treats when she is using her furniture instead of yours.

Like most training, the earlier you start, the better. Remember though, kittens younger than six months generally do not respond to catnip as well as adults do. You may need to try other incentives.

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