

Peer Reviewed

Scratching Behavior in Cats

I am trying to help clients deal with cats that scratch furniture without having to declaw them, but sometimes I run out of ideas. Is there anything new to offer?

CONTINUES

In many situations, it is possible to keep an adult cat in the home with claws intact. With a good understanding of feline marking, play, and stretching behavior, a home environment that meets a cat's needs and leaves family possessions intact can be created.

WHY DO CATS MARK?

Marking is a normal and important social behavior for all animals. In cats, it appears to be an innate behavior; they do not need to be taught how to mark with their claws, and even cats that are declawed will still go through marking motions. Cats commonly use several different types of social marking behaviors, including scent marks or visual marks that delineate territory, availability for mating, and other social functions.

Cats can leave a scent mark through facial marking or “bunting” (rubbing the sides of the face or

body parts against objects) or, of course, through urine marking.¹ They can leave a visual mark with their claws and glands on the feet leave a scent mark behind. Facial marking is not usually destructive or bothersome to a cat owner, but marking with claws can do considerable damage to household possessions.

SCRATCHING BEHAVIOR

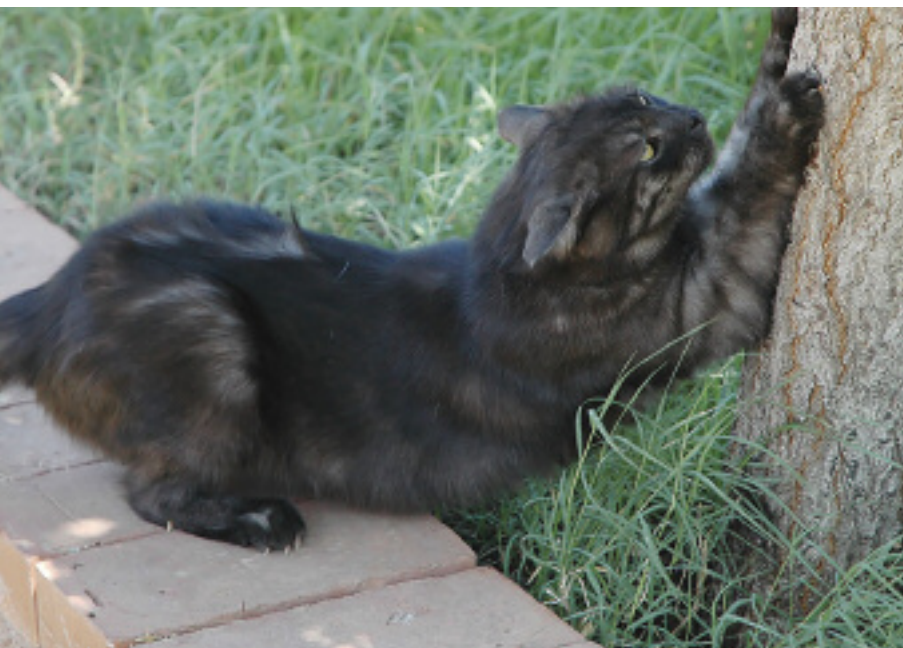
Scratching behavior in cats appears to fulfill multiple functions, including leaving a visual and scent mark on objects, conditioning the claws, stretching the body, and exercising the muscles and tendons involved in claw usage.² The function the cat is fulfilling at any given time may determine where the cat scratches.

Scratching behavior outdoors tends to occur along regularly traveled routes rather than at the periphery of the territory; this has led to speculation that these marks serve as navigational markers. Some authors contend that scratching within the home, however, indicates anxiety or insecurity and may be more likely to occur at entrances and exits.² Others disagree and suggest that scratching behavior indoors tends to occur repeatedly at the same sites near where cats spend most of their time. These authors speculate that these marks provide reassurance and security to the marking cat rather than defining territory.³

Loose claw sheaths are also shed during claw-marking behavior, and cats are often noted engaging in claw marking upon awakening. Speculation on whether olfactory glands between the toes leave a noticeable scent is ongoing. No published studies have confirmed that cats sniff claw mark locations. However, studies have noted that the same claw-marking sites are used over and over both by outdoor and indoor cats.

PREFERRED MATERIALS & BODY POSTURE

Cats that live or go outdoors tend to use wood objects, such as boards or trees. Indoor cats may choose a variety of objects. Often these objects are in prominent locations or pathways, and



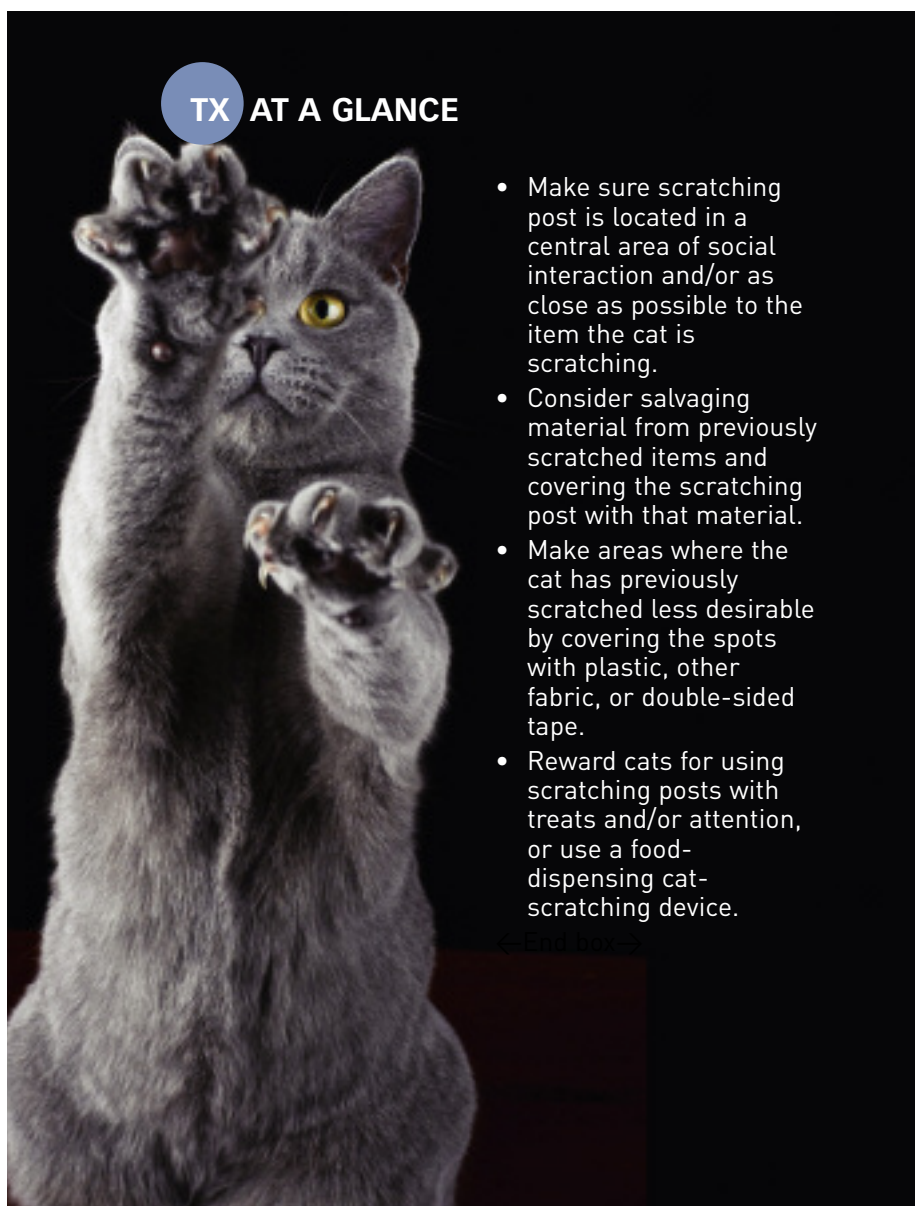
furniture and carpets are the common targets. A cat may use a horizontal or vertical object; some cats prefer one or the other or both. When scratching, the cat usually positions itself with the chest lower than the hindquarters, stretches out, and alternates paws to extend and retract the claws into the surface. On vertical surfaces, a cat may assume a different posture, with the chest higher than the hindquarters. Some bouts are quite vigorous and others are shorter, but in both cases a scent and visual mark remains behind.

The type of material that an individual cat prefers varies. Therefore, it is a good idea to offer the cat a variety of materials to see which ones the cat prefers. For a scratching post, both the location and the ability to stretch and gain a good hold onto the post seem important. The post should be stable, tall enough so the cat can stretch out, and sturdy enough that the post will not fall over. Some older studies indicated that cats may prefer materials with a longitudinal weave, but no newer studies available verify this desire. The location of the scratching post does seem to matter to many cats.

In general, claw marking tends to occur in prominent locations near where activity takes place. The assumption is that since the cat is attempting to leave a visual and scent mark as communication, placement of those marks matter. This may explain why a cat seems to pick prominent pieces of furniture for this display. To encourage use of a scratching post, the post should be located where people and the cat spend their time. In some cases another post should also be located close to where the cat normally sleeps because, as mentioned earlier, many cats will scratch upon awakening.

CHANGING MARKING BEHAVIOR

Often the cat establishes a marking location that may not be suitable to the human occupants of the home. Rather than punish the cat, which often leads to scratching in secret and frustration and anxiety at the inability to carry out a normal behavior, environmental changes may help.



TX AT A GLANCE

- Make sure scratching post is located in a central area of social interaction and/or as close as possible to the item the cat is scratching.
- Consider salvaging material from previously scratched items and covering the scratching post with that material.
- Make areas where the cat has previously scratched less desirable by covering the spots with plastic, other fabric, or double-sided tape.
- Reward cats for using scratching posts with treats and/or attention, or use a food-dispensing cat-scratching device.

If the scratching post is located in an out-of-the-way area not usually frequented by the cat, moving it to a more central area of social interaction may stimulate the cat to use the post. Moving the post also helps cover areas where the cat is currently scratching to make them less desirable.

If the cat has consistently scratched a piece of furniture that is now going to be replaced, salvaging some of the material and covering a scratching post with that material may help

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CONTINUES



attract the cat to the scratching post. Place the refurbished post as close as possible to where the furniture was located and cover the new piece of furniture (see suggestions in the following paragraph) until the cat shows a well-established use pattern for the scratching post.

It often helps to make the areas where the cat has previously scratched less attractive to the cat. This can be achieved by covering the spots with plastic or other fabric or using double-sided tape. Another alternative is a food-dispensing cat-scratching device called Pavlov's Cat (good

petstuff.com) (Figure 1). When the cat scratches the device, it rotates and dispenses food into a bowl, providing the cat's daily food ration. For many cats, the reward of food is enough for them to use this device for scratching behavior.

Some authors have suggested remote punishment devices that scare the cat away, thereby making the location undesirable to the cat. Evidence on the efficacy of these types of interventions is lacking, and each cat will vary in its reaction to and tolerance of punishment devices.

In most cases, a cat can be taught to use a scratching post rather than owner possessions. With a little time and effort most cats will respond well to the changes.

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