

Encouraging Use of a Scratching Post

Scratching in a cat serves two functions, territorial marking and also to remove the outer layer of each claw, made blunt by wear, revealing a sharper one underneath. Cats frequently scratch soon after awaking and not far from their place of sleep. The act of scratching, which typically begins as reaching forward with the forepaws fully extended, is important to stretch a cat's muscles.

Some cats prefer to stretch using horizontal surfaces, while others prefer vertical ones. Cats also show individual preferences for surface texture. Some scratch on nobby textiles of upholstery or carpets, rattan, or corrugated cardboard. Other cats prefer smoother surfaces, such as finished wood, plastered walls, or a mattress. Early in life, kittens should be encouraged to use a scratching post. Many kittens are immediately attracted to the scratching post, but some require coaxing. It may be helpful to place a suspended toy or treat on top of the post, encouraging your cat to reach up and make contact with a post. The most important consideration, however, are the post's location, position (horizontal or vertical), and surface texture.

In choosing the location of the scratching post, remember that cats tend to scratch near their favorite resting places. Watch your kitten to see where it is naturally inclined to scratch and immediately place a scratching post at the location. It may be useful to experiment with scratching post placement and texture to see which attracts the most use. Scratching posts are available in a wide variety of styles including cardboard posts that can be laid flat or inclined at any angle. Posts wrapped in heavy twine or rope are also popular. The best scratching post is the one that your cat will use.

It is not worthwhile to punish your cat for inappropriate scratching unless it is recent in onset. Shouting at it or making a noise to frighten it away, even if you catch it "in the act," is likely to be ineffective and may make things worse. In response to your punishment, an anxious cat is even more likely to mark its territory. Your cat could learn to avoid you or simply discover that it can scratch that location unbothered when you are not nearby.

Similarly, covering the undesirable scratching place with a foul-tasting substance will likely drive the animal to use another surface that may be even less desirable to you. A more reliable tactic for the long run is to retrain your cat to scratch appropriate surfaces by making them more attractive than undesirable locations.

If your cat's scratching is already causing damage to your property, there are several approaches to resolving the problem. First identify your cat's preferences for location and surface quality. Are these close to its favorite resting place? Are they vertical, inclined, or horizontal? Are they rough or smooth, carpeted or not? Second, block access to the undesirable spot by covering it with plastic sheeting, aluminum foil, or some other material that is not appealing to your cat.

Third, select one or more new scratching posts that incorporate your cat's preferences. By trial and error, you may find one that is particularly alluring to your pet. Finally, place the new scratching posts directly in front of its favored locations. This will help your cat to associate scratching with the appropriate surface and encourage use of the post.