



North Seattle Veterinary Clinic | 11032 8th Avenue NE | Seattle, WA 98125 | 206-523-7187 | info@northseattlevet.com

Training Your New Cat to Stop Scratching Furniture

By Dr. Sophia Yin – www.drsophiayin.com

Why Do Cats Scratch Furniture?

When cats are outdoors, this exercise in creativity is not so bad. Outdoor cats just find a prominent tree and make their mark for all to see. This visual graffiti tells passers-by “Kitty was here.” Those cats who venture for a closer look can get a whiff of the fine print, too, because each time Kitty makes an artful scrape, he leaves a chemical note from the glands in his paws. Since scratching prominent objects is a natural behavior, cats are bound to try it indoors too. Unfortunately the primary tree-replacement indoors is furniture, and it seems the more expensive the furniture, the more tree-like it looks to a cat.

Train the Cat to Scratch in More Appropriate Locations

Luckily we can guide cats toward designated scratching objects and away from our favorite furniture. The key is to make scratching the furniture inconvenient and using their own designated scratch post fun.

Step one is to figure out what your cat likes. There are more styles of cat scratching posts and surfaces than there are pairs of shoes in the average women’s closet, and cats have preferences for what they like. For instance, my Bengal cat, whom I adopted when he was 9 years of age, had a history of ignoring scratching posts in his first home and in mine. However, two seconds after I assembled the mother of all cat scratch posts—one designed to look like a tree—he was on it like a college kid who sees free pizza. It was tall enough for him to stand on his hind legs and really stretch his body out. Even better, the platform on the top, which looked like the top of a tree was wide enough for him to lie lazily or claw and scratch. The posts he had in the past were relatively short and boring for such a big cat. Dante obviously preferred posts with more flare.

Not all cats need something so expensive. In general cats tend to like surfaces that are tall enough to allow them to stretch. Carpet, cardboard and sisal rope are the most common types of surfaces. These surfaces can be made to hang from doors, cover posts and other structures, or be nailed to the wall like paintings. You can even make your own sisal posts that go from floor to ceiling.

Another important component of the perfect scratch post is its location. No-one will see or smell the message created by scratching if it’s in a low traffic, out of the way place. So scratch posts need to be in prominent locations and areas your cat likes to go. Dante’s super cool cat tree was in the most used room in the house—my office. In your house, that favorite location might be near the furniture he loves to scratch, near his bed, or any other area you see that he frequents. Don’t worry, if you feel that a post right next to his favorite scratching couch won’t work long term, once you get him using a more appropriate surface you can systematically, little by little, move that post to an area closer to where you want it.

In addition to getting the type of post your cat likes and putting it in the right location, we have other tricks to get it to appear more attractive than your couch. A dash of catnip or toys attached to the post will help attract him to it more often. Even taking a patch of your old couch and attaching it to the official scratching area can help. When he uses the toys or the posts, you can reward him with a treat.



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In fact, if you think getting him to like the new area over the old may be tricky, you can even clicker train him to like scratching his post. That is, train him that a toy clicker means a treat (such as a bite of canned cat food) will be delivered to him within a second. Then actually have sessions where, when you click and treat when he shows any interest in the post. You can systematically click and treat for behavior that looks more and more like scratching and then for more robust scratches to the post. Pretty soon you'll have a cat that loves to scratch the preferred area.

Make Scratching Your Furniture, Yucky

The second half of the recipe for training Kitty to only scratch designated posts is that you must make the couch a yucky place to be. When the new couch arrives, initially cover potential scratching areas with plastic or contact paper with the sticky side out. Or try some other material that cats don't like to scratch, such as aluminum foil. Alternatively, you can try one of the pet store cat repellents. Their effectiveness depends on your cat's individual odor sensitivities.

If these measures don't work, there are still many more. For instance, you can set up a booby trap, such as a motion detector that emits a high-pitched sound, to startle the offending scratcher in he gets too close to the couch. Or you can try the SssCat which detects motion and then sounds a tone and emits a surprise burst of air. The trick with booby traps is that they have to be positioned so that they only go off at the correct time. They also have to be used long enough and in conjunction with rewarding more appropriate scratch spots, until scratching in the new locations becomes a habit.

Don't Forget to Trim Your Cat's Nails

Of course, you also want to remember to trim your cat's nails, since shorter, blunt nails are less likely to cause damage. Your veterinarian can have a technician show you the correct way to clip the nails. If you think your cat will dislike having her nails trimmed you can even train her systematically to hold still and actually enjoy the procedures.

A note about nail caps: There are several brands of blunt acrylic nail caps that you can place over your cat's nails to prevent the kitty from damaging furniture when scratching. These are glued into place, and generally stay on about 4-8 weeks. They can be purchased online. The most common brand is called Soft Paws. Our technicians can show you how to place them, and you can replace them at home as needed.