



Training a cat to use a scratching post

Furniture scratching is often referred to as "destructive." However, scratching is a normal behavior for cats. It isn't something they do to be destructive or annoying. They scratch because they need to keep their nails in good condition and they also need to mark territory to feel secure.

You may not care whether the cat uses your furniture or carpet as a scratching post, but you might care one day when the cat can't tell the difference between that old sofa and the brand new one. That's why it's important to direct the behavior where it's good for both cat and owner.

What works is to have a well designed scratching post which satisfies the urge to scratch. A good scratching post will be:

- Sturdy (meaning it won't tip over when pulled on)
- Tall enough to stretch entire body up against it
- In a prominent place in the house
- Made of a material the cat likes to scratch on
- As wide as the cat

Preventing "bad" behaviors from the beginning is easier than fixing them once a habit is established, so make sure you start your cat or kitten out right. Ideally, there will be multiple scratching surfaces/textures for the cat to choose from, in various locations in the house.

Remember that cats like to scratch to stretch - and they usually want to stretch before and after eating, as well as after napping, so keep that in mind when choosing locations for scratching materials. Don't forget that they want to mark their territory - so the post might need to be in a prominent location. Many people make the mistake of putting the post in a dark corner or in a seldom-used room which isn't going to appeal to kitty.

Choosing a scratching post

You'll have many choices on the market- so how to choose? One with a variety of materials and surfaces would be great. Most cats prefer sisal rope, though some cats like carpet or wood better. What they want is something they can really dig into with their nails so they can remove those pesky outer layers.

Something that also provides a horizontal surface to scratch is good, especially if your cat has that preference (you'll notice that some cats like to scratch rugs or the top of the couch).

If you get a kitty condo, you can fulfill many of your cat's needs at once. They're good for households with shy cats or with dogs or kids - a great getaway spot for kitty. They create more territory, which is helpful in a small home, or a multi-cat household. They also provide your cat with fun, mental stimulation and exercise. You can build a scratching post or cat tree yourself - there are many websites with instructions on how to do this.

You want to avoid an inadequate scratching post, because it will be a waste of your money and will lead you to frustration! Some examples of bad posts are ones that are too small/short, provide only fluffy carpet as a scratching surface (cats want something they can really dig their nails into, which a loosely woven carpet may not provide), or are too wobbly to pull on and stretch fully.



The scratchers that hang over the doorknob are ineffective and may even be dangerous. Their instability may cause a sudden movement while a cat is stretching and this could lead to injury. So shop wisely and ask the store where you purchase your post or tree if they have an exchange or refund policy.

Many cats also enjoy the cardboard scratchers. They are inexpensive, so you could get a few to have throughout the home. A post is still recommended, but the cardboard scratchers are a great way to provide some extra scratching areas for your cat, especially if they like horizontal scratching. Some are even built at an angle which many cats find satisfying.

If possible, make them more stable. One clever cat lover built a heavy wooden box just the size to fit a cardboard scratcher in it so it wouldn't move around on the floor while being used. Some Velcro could achieve the same results.

Remember that praise gets you a lot further than correction or punishment. Make the scratching post appealing and try to entice your cat to use it by utilizing toys, treats or catnip to "lure" the cat into a standing position by the post. You can also scratch your own nails on the post to make a sound that cats may respond to in kind. Often they naturally figure out what the post is for- and then it is time for praise! Offer your cat a treat, some affection and play to reinforce the appropriate behavior.

Many well intentioned cat owners attempt to show the cat how to use a post by carrying them to the scratching post and holding their paws and moving them in a scratching motion. We DO NOT recommend this technique to train your cat! Many cats become uncomfortable being handled in this manner and fear they will be moved against their will if they go near the post...and then they have learned to avoid their post at all costs! It's best to allow them to discover the post on their own or using the techniques described earlier.

As we hinted at before, punishment does not work well with most cats. If you yell at your cat or use a squirt gun to deter your cat from furniture scratching, you may get immediate results (i.e. the cat will stop the behavior). The problem is that the cat will soon learn to associate these punishments with YOU, and just scratch the object of desire when you are not around.

Training your cat not to scratch in the wrong places

We prefer a training method known as "remote punishment." This means the punishment is associated with the behavior and not with the person trying to correct the behavior. If a cat has already begun to scratch a particular piece of furniture, you will need to make whatever s/he is scratching unattractive to the cat. Double sided tape works well, which you can get in any hardware store. There is also a product made for this purpose, called "Sticky Paws."

Some people have better luck taping up pieces of tinfoil on the furniture. During the training period, this is meant to act as a deterrent from scratching. The cat goes to scratch and has an unpleasant sensation when they do so. After a few weeks of attempting to scratch the furniture, the cat usually gives up and the tape or tinfoil can be removed. Some people also have luck using throws or furniture covers.

There are also other training devices on the market such as sprays and alarms that might work when other training methods are ineffective. It is important to remember that this must be done in addition to providing your cat with an appropriate scratching implement. While the training is going on, you will want to have the scratching post nearby to encourage its use.



It is true; some cats are harder to train than others. You may have to be creative. For example, you can modify a scratching post to suit your needs. One person wrapped denim materials around a scratching post when they realized that their cat preferred scratching their jeans to any other material! There are also many cats who like to scratch while lying on their backs.

These are the ones who scratch the underside of box springs and chairs. Accommodate them by tipping the cat tree or scratching post on its side and see if you can entice them to use the post in its new position. You may even have to try a brief training period in a small room with just the essentials - litter box, food, water, toys, bedding and the scratching post. By blocking off the cats access to the things you don't want her to scratch, and limiting her scratching options to the post, she can get into the habit of using it. This is not meant to be a punishment, so your kitty will need lots of socializing, playtime and affection while she is sequestered in her training room. After a few days of using the post, she may be ready to re-enter the rooms that hold the forbidden furniture, ready to focus her scratching on her post, rather than your couch.