



Alternatives To Declawing

Pet Professional Guild Feline Educational Handout #1

WHY DO CATS SCRATCH?

Scratching is a deeply ingrained instinctual behavior in cats. It satisfies many basic needs, including conditioning the claws for hunting and defense, stretching the back and shoulder muscles, marking territory, and releasing pent-up emotions and stress. We can't stop scratching behavior, but cats can be taught to redirect their scratching to appropriate items.



WHAT IS DECLAWING?

Cats are both predator and prey, and their claws are designed to be strong and sturdy for use in catching prey and as a primary means of defense. Unlike human nails, which grow from skin, cats' claws grow from the last bone in each of their toes, or their "fingertips." "Declawing," or onychectomy, is the amputation of this bone (the fingertip), which also involves cutting the tendons, nerves, and ligaments to which the bone is attached. It is a major, irreversible surgical procedure that can put a cat at risk for a variety of physical and behavioral problems. In many countries around the world declawing is illegal, as it is considered inhumane.

ALTERNATIVES TO DECLAWING

There are a number of simple and effective alternatives to declawing that will keep your furniture safe and your bond with your cat strong.

Trim Your Cat's Claws

Between 4 and 16 weeks of age, kittens begin exploring their environment using their claws—this is the perfect time to teach them to use acceptable scratching items and tolerate having their claws trimmed. Even adult cats can be taught to tolerate claw trimming. Trimming the tips of your cat's front claws once a week will help protect furniture and other items from potential damage. If you are uncomfortable trimming your cat's claws, ask your veterinarian to demonstrate the procedure so you can practice at home. If your cat is resistant to claw trimming or to having her paws handled, a qualified training specialist can help you teach your cat to accept (and even enjoy) the procedure.

Provide Preferred Scratching Materials

Pay attention to when, where, and what types of materials your cat tends to scratch—it will give you important information about her preferences. Corrugated cardboard, sisal, and wood are the materials of choice for many cats. Your cat might also prefer to scratch vertically, horizontally, or on an angle.

When choosing a scratching post, make sure it is tall enough for your cat to stretch to her full height (at least 28-36 inches). Also ensure that it has a wide base. If the post wobbles or falls over when your cat uses it, she will likely seek out a more stable option that



might not be acceptable.

Are there certain parts of the house where your cat likes to spend time or does most of her scratching? Those are the areas where her preferred scratching materials should be placed. Some cats like to scratch right after waking up from a nap or before feeding time, so that would be the perfect time to lure her to her scratching post with food, treats, catnip, or a toy.

If you have more than one cat, you will need at least one scratching post or pad for each cat. Remember to praise your cat when she uses her scratching post.

Use Remote Deterrents

Remote deterrents help prevent your cat from scratching inappropriate items without your intervention. In other words, they do the work for you, while at the same time preserving your special bond with your cat. Punishment can damage this bond and is ineffective because it simply teaches your cat to engage in the unwanted behavior when you are not present.



Use double-sided adhesive tape to deter cats from scratching inappropriate items. You could also use aluminum foil to protect items, as cats generally don't like the sound or feel of it. Cats also don't like citrus, so you could fill a spray bottle with water and lemon juice, and spray items that are off limits a couple of times a day (spray a small area to test for staining, first). Large furniture items can be draped with plastic sheeting or thick blankets to discourage scratching.

All of these deterrents are for temporary use while your cat is learning to redirect her scratching to appropriate items. When using remote deterrents, you must also provide your cat with acceptable scratching alternatives that are in line with her preferences.

Apply Nail Caps

Nail caps are soft plastic nail covers that are glued to a cat's nails. They are humane and safe, and cats tolerate wearing them extremely well. The caps come in different sizes for a good fit, and they are easy to apply and last for several weeks. Your veterinarian can apply them for you, or you can learn to apply them yourself at home.

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All training should be done in a positive manner using rewards based, scientifically sound training methods.

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Pet Professional Guild Directory: www.petprofessionalguild.com/PetGuildMembers.

To learn more about force-free training and humane, up-to-date, scientifically sound behaviour modification and training methods, see www.petprofessionalguild.com