

Feline Claw Counseling

Why Do Cats Scratch?

The cat claw is an anatomically unique design. The claws of the forelimb are retractable, allowing the cat to expose and retract their nail as needed. Cats expose their claws for many reasons, including hunting, in times of conflict with other animals, or for marking inanimate objects (both visually and with scent). When a cat is outdoors this marking behaviour would typically take place on objects such as trees, fences or other solid surfaces., but for cats that are kept mainly indoors, these objects would be scratching posts or other desirable surfaces. If scratching posts are undesirable or not made accessible to the cat then it may scratch walls, door frames, couches, etc. It is impractical and unrealistic to expect a cat to stop scratching and therefore is important that appropriate scratching, climbing, and playing areas are made available to the indoor cat. It is



When a cat scratches inanimate objects it serves 3 purposes, all of which are natural and necessary to the cat. They scratch in order to sharpen the claws by shedding the old outer nail, to mark the object both visually and through scent via pheromones they emit from their paw pads, and lastly to stretch out their limbs after waking from a long nap. Scratching and marking may increase if the cat experiences any stress or anxiety, such as inter-cat conflicts and/or if environmental resources are restricted or threatened (i.e. Litter boxes, food, water, sleeping areas, etc.).

What Causes Inappropriate Scratching?



There are some factors that may cause marking behaviour to increase or cause inappropriate marking behaviour and typically all these factors can be categorized as things that cause the cat stress or anxiety. Anything that poses a threat to the cat's territory or resources can be expected to cause an increase in marking behaviour. If there are other pets in the household, their relationship should be evaluated to ensure no conflicts of territory/resources, animals coming to the windows/doors (especially other cats) can be a big stressor, constant coming and going of people in the house can be a stressor, and any renovations/changes to the regular habitat and routines of the cat can also be a major stressor.

Cats are typically independent creatures but they still need mental stimulation, especially a cat that is kept mainly indoors as cats that are allowed outdoors will get their stimulation through other animals and objects outside. Studies have shown that marking behaviours will increase if there is not sufficient stimulation, especially for indoor cats, so it is always a good idea to make sure there are plenty of toys and play time set aside to keep them happy and stimulated.

The factors that are often overlooked when searching for the cause for increased marking, are the everyday household resources. These include:

1. **Litterbox** (cleaned a minimum of once per day, ideally completely cleaned out every 2-4 weeks, 1 litterbox/cat plus one extra, litterboxes spread throughout house and on multiple levels. Often preference is unscented clumping litter and uncovered litterbox, evaluate this on a per cat basis)
2. **Food and Water** Ideally cats should be fed 3-4 times per day and if there are multiple cats in the household, they should be separated during feeding time in order to eliminate bullying for food and the resulting anxiety. They should always have access to fresh water.
3. **Sleeping/Resting Areas** There should be plenty available in order to accommodate multiple cats as most cats do not wish to sleep in proximity to other cats. These should be located on high and low ground and there should be options to be hidden or in the open.
4. **Toys** Once again there should be enough available to accommodate multiple cats and many options. If possible toys should be rotated on a weekly basis to keep up with stimulation.
5. **Scratching Areas** Many options should be available in regards to texture and location of scratching posts. Typically sisal rope and carpet go over well with cats but can also provide wood that doesn't splinter and cardboard as options. Scratching areas should be located near windows (ensure able to cover if needed), near sleeping areas and in areas of high and low traffic.
6. **Human Attention** (if desired by the cat) set aside time for each cat to get some attention and to play.



Often if these resources are not up to the cats needs/standards/desires it can cause the cat to act out in many ways, one of those ways being marking behaviour, because they have no other way to communicate with us their discomfort.

What is the Ideal Scratching Post?

It is best to offer multiple scratching surfaces (i.e. wood, carpet, sisal rope, etc.) to determine the cat's preference as all cats are different. As stated previously, typically sisal rope and carpet are very well

accepted by cats. Studies have shown that sisal rope is the preference for cats less than 9 years of age with carpet being the preference for cats over 9 years. It is never a bad idea to offer a wide variety of materials for the cats to scratch as there are some cats that may prefer cardboard, wood, or something else. Scratching posts should be located in a variety of locations, including areas where the cat has already chosen to scratch. There should be both vertical and horizontal scratching posts available, and the vertical post should extend above the height of the cat when standing on its hind legs and be sturdy enough that it will not fall while in use. Recent studies have shown that there was a strong preference towards a simple upright structures scratching post with 2-3 levels that was at least 3 feet tall. In general, a scratching post should be bought/designed in accordance to your cats preferences, there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to scratching posts, more like 'one size fits most'.



Getting the Cat to use the Scratching Post

Positive reinforcement should be the biggest tool used when training a cat/kitten to use the scratching post. Food and/or catnip are could tools to encourage activity around/on the scratching post and help lead to the appropriate use of the scratching post. Having toys or playing with the cats around the scratching post may also be an effective tactic. It may be useful to take the cat and gently rub its paws against the scratching post as if it were scratching and give it a food reward, although this should only be done if it does not cause any stress or anxiety for the cat. Punishment (negative reinforcement) in any form can increase the anxiety of the cat and potentially increase marking/inappropriate scratching and possibly causing them to be fearful of people. Discussing where the cat is scratching and evaluating the availability and quality of the previously discussed resources may help to determine the cause of the scratching as well as optimal locations to place a scratching post, i.e. where the cat has already chosen to mark. If needed, tin foil, two-sided tape, plastic, or furniture covers can be used to help deter the cat from scratching but should not be the only tool used to help solve this equation. Any deterrents used should not cause pain to the cat. Some of the changes suggested may not be 'tasteful' to the layout of the house, but please understand that we are *sharing* our houses with our pets and it needs to then suit both the needs of us and the cat.

What is the Next step?

If you have evaluated all aspects of your cat's indoor life and all resources are plentiful and up to the standards of your cat, yet it continues to mark objects you do not wish to be marked then some other options may need to be exhausted. First of all, it is important to maintain the cat's claw health, meaning they will need to be trimmed every so often. Starting young is the easiest for cats so they get used to it before they grow up, if needed Southside Animal Clinic staff can provide a demonstration on how to trim nails and answer any other questions regarding this process or the technicians at Southside Animal Clinic would be more than willing to do the nail trims should you prefer.



Another option may be to use synthetic pheromones which are used to spray objects we wish to keep free of scratches. This synthetic pheromone is replicated from the pheromone a cat naturally produces from glands in their face and they use this pheromone to mark areas/objects where they feel comfortable and happy. By spraying this pheromone on the objects we do not want marked, ideally, this sends the message that this object has already been marked and there is no need to mark it again through scratching.



Lastly, you could try claw caps called Soft Paws. These are synthetic claw caps that can come in many colours and are easily applied using non-toxic, cold-binding, veterinary-grade adhesive to the claws of the front paws, they can be applied to the hind paws as well if desired. This solution will prevent the cat from causing any damage to the objects it chooses to scratch without requiring any surgery. Often cats go on with their business without even realizing anything is different. Each application can last up to 6 weeks, depending on the cat as some are rougher than others. These caps are also very easily enough applied that they can often be done at home. The staff at Southside Animal clinic would be more than happy to demonstrate how to apply the Soft Paws and even continue with applications if desired. There have been cases where owners have chosen to do the soft paws applications and after a period of time have been able to discontinue use because their cats have lost interest in scratching anything other than their scratching post, although it is important to remember this is not a guaranteed outcome.

