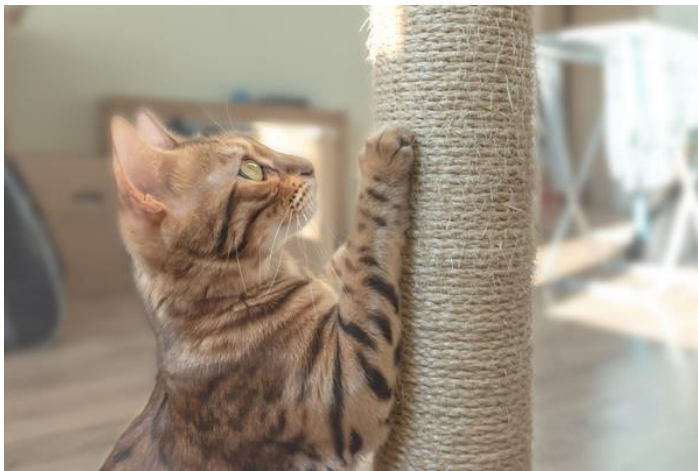


# Scratching Behavior in Cats: Various Approaches

Many of the animals that we invite to join our households are descended from predators. Our dogs and cats come with built-in tools (teeth, claws), yet dogs and cats alike can be trained to refrain from using their tools in ways that could cause damage to our homes or inflict injury on people or other pets. It is important to understand that a cat's claws are essential to their bodies.

## Why do cats scratch?



Cats scratch and claw for several reasons. First, scratching shortens and conditions the claws. Cats in the wild do not have caregivers or veterinarians to give them pedicures, so they take matters into their own hands (paws). Second, scratching allows an effective, whole body stretch. Cats stretch their muscles as they rise on their hind feet, arch their back, extend their legs, and extrude their

claws.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, cats scratch to mark their territory, visibly with claw marks, and invisibly by leaving the scent from their foot pads.

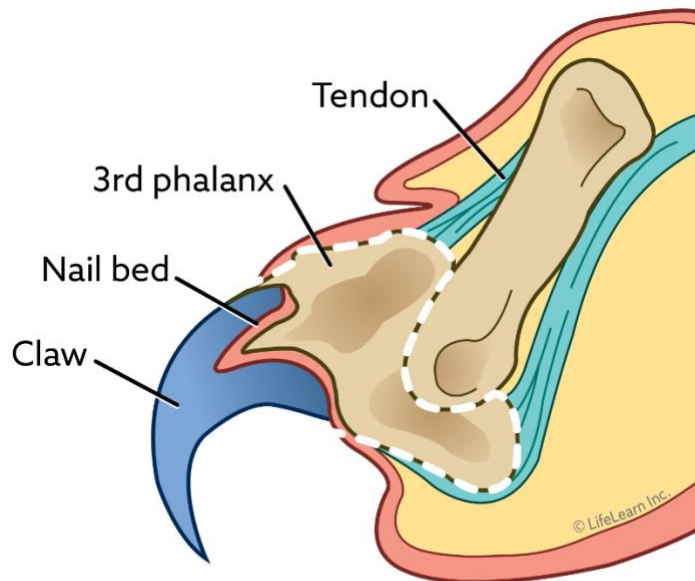
## Why is scratching a problem?

Cats that live primarily outdoors claw prominent objects such as tree trunks or fence posts. Cats that live primarily or exclusively indoors are still inclined to claw prominent objects and do not discriminate based on an object's personal value. Cats scratch hard surfaces such as furniture, walls, and doors. They may also scratch malleable, soft surfaces such as cardboard or loosely woven carpet and upholstery.

Sometimes, scratching occurs inadvertently when cats use their claws to grasp surfaces, including drapery, while climbing. Claws can also cause injuries to people when cats are overly playful or resist handling.

With a good understanding of feline behavior and a little bit of effort, it should be possible to prevent or avoid most problems caused by our cat's claws.

## Declawing is Harmful to Cats



The dotted line shows what bone and tissue would be removed as part of an onychectomy. (PDA; partial digital amputation)

Declawing is a surgery that amputates the toe at the last joint (onychectomy or partial digital amputation - PDA). **This surgery can have serious, harmful, physical, and behavioral outcomes for cats**, including chronic pain in the feet, chronic pain in the spine from changing weight-bearing, increased biting behavior, and increased inappropriate elimination.

Because of the harm this surgery can cause, declawing is banned in several countries and regions, including the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, and most provinces in Canada, including

Quebec. The American Veterinary Medical Association, Feline Veterinary Medical Association (FelineVMA), Fear Free, and many other professional veterinary organizations oppose or prohibit declaw surgery.

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# What are non-surgical alternatives to manage my cat's scratching behavior?



Provide scratching options from the start. As soon as you introduce your cat to your home, begin training her to use appropriate objects. Provide a variety of scratching posts to learn her preference: does she stretch up high or does she prefer to scratch on the floor? Does she favor cardboard, sisal, wood, or carpet? Commercially available posts often contain a very tightly woven carpet

that few cats favor; you may need to be creative and fashion your own posts. Because cats use their scratching posts for marking and stretching as well as sharpening their claws, the post should be tall enough for the cat to scratch while standing on her hind legs with the forelegs extended, and sturdy enough that it does not topple.

Posts should be placed in several areas. Cats often scratch upon waking up from a nap, so a post is needed near favored resting spots. Since cats communicate through their scratch marks, it is also important to put posts along some of the highly traveled pathways in the home. Finally, if you have a piece of furniture that is very valuable, yet might be a scratching target, put a post beside that item. You might temporarily cover the valuable item until your cat has begun to use the nearby post regularly.

Training often moves along more quickly when you provide treats. If you notice your cat using a post, try tossing her a treat just as she finishes. This will encourage her to repeat the behavior. For cats that show no interest in posts, additional training may be needed. This training can involve rewarding every small interaction with the post, gradually shaping your cat to scratch longer and harder. While your cat is still learning, you can prevent her from damaging valuables by protecting the objects. The simplest approach is to cover the scratched surface with a less appealing material, like aluminum foil. Another option is to apply double-sided sticky tape, such as Sticky Paws®, to the objects. Be sure to have an appropriate scratching post nearby.

To minimize damage, trim your cat's claws regularly - at least once a month. Ask your veterinary team to show you how to do a gentle claw trim. If your cat is fussy, take your time to train her. Try trimming just a single claw each day, while giving her some very delicious treats.

Another way to prevent damage is to use commercial claw covers. Soft caps such as Soft Paws® can be glued to the claws. The process itself is painless but be prepared – claw caps are not permanent and need to be replaced regularly. However, they can prevent damage while you are training your cat to use her scratching posts.

## My cat scratches me, my family, and my other pets. What can I do?

Cats use their claws to protect themselves when they feel threatened. Initially, many cats only scratch when cornered, but over time, they may anticipate an unpleasant interaction and may even seem to lash out proactively. If your cat is scratching in social contexts, it is best to seek professional help. It is important to identify triggers and to learn to recognize some of the more subtle signals your cat might be using to try to feel safe.

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