

Human Cat Scratcher

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains why cats like to scratch.

Q: When I wear jeans, my cat Buffy likes to use me as a scratching post. Is this normal behavior? I have had Buffy since she was 4 months old, and she has been doing this ever since. I don't mind -- I just buy a new pair. However, I'm up to 7 pairs in 2 years. She sometimes gets her claws through the jeans and into my skin. I was just wondering why she does this.

She tends to do the same on the rugs, and not on the scratching posts I have bought in the past. It's funny how she will only do this when I wear jeans. If I'm wearing a suit or shorts, or when the fabric of the pants is thin she tends not to do it, even if I put my leg right in front of her. However, when I'm wearing jeans and come home after being out for hours, she will start scratching me the minute I get in the house. I love her too much to stop it because she seems quite happy.

A: Buffy is using you as her own portable scratching post because you've been reinforcing the behavior. This behavior is normal for her since you've encouraged it by letting her scratch your legs. Typically, you do not see this type of activity with the majority of cats. Most cats would rather scratch on other surfaces such as scratching poles and horizontal scratchers.

Buffy is marking you with scent glands located on the bottom of her feet and she is also visibly marking you with scratches. Additionally, she is giving herself a manicure. You might want to consider other painless and less expensive ways of having Buffy greet and claim you as hers. Another reason to consider changing this activity is that you might have a guest over who does not appreciate being used as a human scratching post and isn't in the market for a new pair of jeans. Training Buffy to use the proper furniture is easy and, if done right, can help strengthen the bond between the two of you.

When you come home, instead of giving her your leg to scratch, lean down, extend one finger out to her and let her sniff your finger and then mark it with her cheek pheromones by her moving her head on your finger. After she says hello to you, engage her in a lovefest of play, grooming and petting. When she does start to scratch your leg, turn your back to her. It is important that a scratching pole or horizontal scratcher is near you for her to scratch. When she is scratching the appropriate scratching surface, praise her and let her know how wonderful she is. It is very important that she has plenty of vertical scratchers as well as horizontal ones.