

Cats Scratching the Surface

Understanding this basic cat behavior can salvage your furniture and save your relationship with your cat.

Marty Becker, DVM, and Janice Willard, DVM

Posted: Tue Aug 3 00:00:00 PDT 2004

1. The Reason Why Cats scratch for several reasons including:

As a visual and olfactory signpost. Visual signaling is probably the most important reason for a cat to scratch. The hieroglyphics cats leave on trees and corners are a visible way of saying, "I am here." Cats also have scent pads at the bottom of their paws, which mark the signposts with their unique odors.

Nail conditioning. Often referred to as claw sharpening, cats do not exactly sharpen their nails. Rather, they remove the outer layer of the nail like an onion's skin. In fact, this activity is so necessary to keep the nails healthy that it is recommended that cat owners do this for them when cats become less able to clean their own nails.

Stretching. Watch any cat reach up, flex its claws and stretch its back and you will see the value of a good stretch. Plus, a scratching cat appears to be in a state of bliss.

Stress relief. Your cat may use the post when it is upset or angry. When frustrated, it may grapple the post and mangle it, seeming to say, "Take that, you monster!" A playful cat may also wrestle the post in mock battle.

"Cats will increase their scratching if they are in a situation of conflict," said Nicholas Dodman, DVM, a boarded veterinary behaviorist. "When this occurs, you have to address the stress in the household."

Because it is a natural behavior, you cannot stop your cat from scratching, but you can train your feline to use its own furniture, not yours. The underlying concept for correcting a scratching problem can be summed up by a "push-me, pull-me" approach. You want to "push" the cat away from your furniture and "pull" it to an appropriate scratching surface.

2. Push the Right Objects Think of the cat's natural environment before domestication. Whether in the desert or woods, cats had an ample choice of objects on which to scratch. In our homes, we must discover what our cats prefer to scratch.