



## **INAPPROPRIATE SCRATCHING BEHAVIOUR**

### WHY DO CATS SCRATCH?

Scratching is a **NORMAL** feline behaviour serving a number of purposes. Dragging the front claws on either a horizontal or vertical surface, loosens and removes the outer husk of the claw to reveal a sharp new surface underneath – vital for hunting and climbing.

This action also exercises the muscles of the front limbs and spine to keep your cat in good shape for hunting – some cats will scratch by lying down and pulling their bodyweight along the floor. For this reason, scratching surfaces need to be non-yielding to resist the force exerted by the cat, so they will usually choose a fixed surface.

Scratching is also used by cats as a form of territorial communication and marking behaviour. Cats are self-sufficient survivalists so prefer to communicate their presence with other cats from a distance to reduce potential injury from aggressive conflict. Scent and sweat glands between the foot pads produce unique pheromones (chemical messages), which are deposited on the scratching surface along with the visual mark – leaving both visual and scent messages for other cats.

### **“WHY DOES MY CAT SCRATCH INDOORS?”**

With the increased frequency of cats having limited or no access to the outdoors, it is inevitable that we will encounter more episodes of scratching indoors. Some cats may just choose to spend more time indoors in comfort and safety and feel more relaxed about maintaining their claws in a secure environment.

Scratching is sometimes also used as a precursor to play, and also as an attention-seeking strategy by some more sociable individuals. Popular substrates for scratching indoors include softwoods (e.g. pine), fabrics, textured wallpaper and carpet, with popular locations including doorframes, furniture and stairs.

If a cat scratches vigorously in the presence of their owners or other cats, it is often a sign of territorial confidence. If the scratching locations are widespread throughout the home, particularly around doorways and windows, then it is likely that the cat is signalling a general sense of insecurity. Whether the scratching is representing claw maintenance, marking behaviour or both, depends on the dynamics of the household, the pattern of the locations and various other factors, and even if the level of scratching is normal for the individual, if attractive scratching areas are not provided indoors then it is likely that unwanted damage will occur to furniture etc.



# Stanhope Park Veterinary Hospital

## “HOW CAN I STOP MY CAT SCRATCHING THE FURNITURE AND CARPETS?”

If you have had your cat from a kitten, then getting them accustomed to being handled for nail clipping at a young age will ensure that they tolerate the procedure as an adult, which can help prevent damage to furniture from scratching. However, nail clipping should never be a substitute for providing appropriate scratching outlets as scratching is a normal feline behaviour. Cats that have access outdoors may also need their sharp claws for defence against attack and to climb and escape from danger.

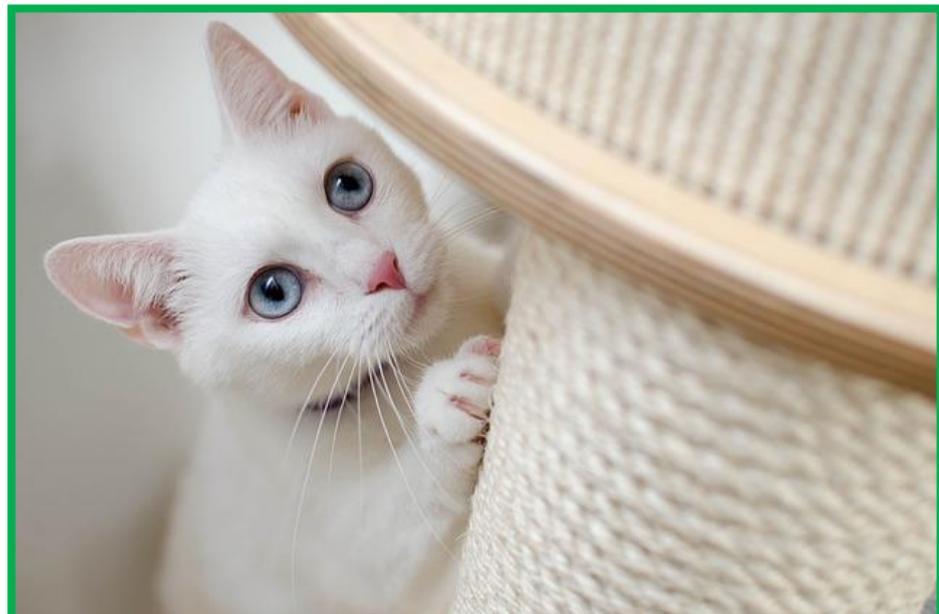
If a particular surface or object is being targeted, then you should provide an acceptable alternative that offers a similar experience. For example, if the cat is targeting textured wallpaper at a certain height, then offer an alternative scratching area that is vertical with a similar height, texture and striations.

There's a huge variety of commercially available cat scratchers, ranging from a basic single upright structure with a heavy base, to elaborate multi-platform modular units that also incorporate play, exercise and resting opportunities (“cat trees”). The golden rule for providing resources such as scratchers, is:

*“one per cat plus one extra for choice, located in different areas”.*

Design choice may depend on factors such as budget and the space available within the home. If space is tight then scratching panels can be fixed to walls, using commercially available products such as sisal twine, bark or corrugated cardboard, or even home-made ones, e.g. sections of carpet. Remember to position the panels to allow the cat to scratch at full stretch.

Synthetic feline pheromones such as **Feliway Classic**, can also be used as an adjunct to provide a sense of safety and security to your cat, thus reducing scratching behaviour for territorial reasons.



If you have any questions about your pets, call us on 01325 620968 or ask a member of our team



# Stanhope Park Veterinary Hospital

## “MY CAT WON’T USE THE SCRATCHING POST”

Many scratching posts are too lightweight to resist scratching, or cannot be fixed to a rigid surface, and so tend not to be favoured by cats. Scratching posts should also be placed in an area that your cat frequents on a regular basis. Cats often like to scratch after a period of sleep, so it can be useful to place a scratcher near a favourite bed or resting area. Cats also find scratchers attractive if placed near a window or radiator in a favoured room, especially the larger modular “cat-tree” types that they can rest on and survey their surroundings. Some commercially available cat scratchers are impregnated with **catnip** – a dried herb that is extremely attractive to many cats so may encourage your cat’s interest in the scratcher. Catnip can also be bought and sprinkled onto the scratcher or catnip solution can be sprayed. Once your cat has approached the scratcher, engaging in a simple predatory-type game around the base (*such as a feather on the end of a piece of string*), will encourage the claws to make contact with the scratching surface. This will hopefully be enough to encourage your cat to visit the scratcher again. If the scratcher has several levels, then placing tasty treats on the modular surfaces can encourage a less playful cat to investigate. **Synthetic feline interdigital pheromone (*Feliscratch*)**, can also be used on the scratcher to encourage your cat to use it, mimicking the natural pheromones released from the paws during scratching behaviour, thus attracting your cat to the scratching surface.

**NEVER TRY TO ENCOURAGE SCRATCHING ON A POST BY GRASPING YOUR CAT’S PAWS  
AND “SHOWING THEM WHAT TO DO”  
– this will inevitably cause a complete aversion to the scratcher.**

## COMMON PROBLEMS

### “My cat scratcher is covered in carpet – will this encourage more damage to my floor coverings?”:

- Many commercial cat scratchers have a carpet covering, but there is no evidence that a cat’s scratching habits will generalise to other areas of carpet within the home, once the scratching post is used regularly.

### “I’ve bought a scratcher but my cat still uses the sofa?”:

- If furniture has been damaged from scratching, it is possible to deter your cat from future visits to the same location, using low-tack double-sided adhesive tape (remember to replace as dust and fibres are collected, and ensure the tape is not too sticky to cause damage to your cat’s paws or furniture). This provides an unpleasant - but not dangerous – experience when your cat next attempts to scratch there. This method can be used until your cat becomes accustomed to using the scratcher instead.

### “My cat is damaging wooden surfaces”:

- If wooden furniture, door frames or bannisters have been targeted, the best thing is to remove all traces of the scratch marks by rubbing down with fine sand paper and treating with a wood polish once the surface is smooth again. Suitable cat scratchers should then be placed nearby – if the area is not ideal for a scratching post on a permanent basis, then it can be relocated very slowly (e.g. an inch at a time), to a more convenient spot, once it is being used regularly.

If you have any questions about your pets, call us on 01325 620968 or ask a member of our team



# Stanhope Park Veterinary Hospital

## “My carpet is being damaged”:

- Many cats target the lower step of the staircase and scratch horizontally whilst lying down. Try placing low-tack double-sided adhesive tape over the scratched areas, and provide a suitable scratcher in close proximity. If your cat grips the stairs on opposite side of the right angle, then it is important to provide both vertical and horizontal scratching surfaces, for example, a breeze block covered in carpet – heavy enough to resist the pull of the scratching action and can be easily positioned.

## “My wallpaper is being damaged”:

- Try fitting a thin sheet of Perspex over the damaged area to provide an unattractive surface to scratch, as well as being easy to clean off scent deposits. Double-sided adhesive tape can also be used if the wallpaper has been sufficiently damaged to require replacement. In this instance, it is essential to provide a vertical scratching panel of similar height nearby.

## “Should I punish my cat for scratching inappropriate surfaces?”:

- No. Please remember your cat is not being naughty or acting out of spite. If the motivation for scratching is claw maintenance, then you are punishing a natural and normal behaviour. If your cat is scratching excessively because of anxiety or insecurity, then punishment will only add to the distress and likely make the situation even worse.

## “How do I know if my cat is scratching due to anxiety?”:

- If the scratching is widespread around the house, you have a multi-cat household or live in a densely cat-populated area, then the scratching may be anxiety related. Even changes within the home such as building work, redecorating or new furniture, can be enough to trigger intensive scratching as your cat adjusts to its altered territory.
- Tensions are common within multi-cat households and territories, that are often not easily identified by owners. The solution to territorial marking lies in trying to identify the cause of the cat’s stress, then providing additional resources around the home to prevent competition between individuals. Even in a single cat household, additional resources to provide a choice, will increase your cat’s sense of security and safety.
- Synthetic feline facial pheromones (*such as Feliway Classic*), mimic the natural pheromones produced in a cat’s facial glands, which they deposit when rubbing against objects to mark their territory, providing self-assurance. Research has shown that cats will avoid scratching or urine spraying in areas where this pheromone is deposited, so it can be a useful adjunct to the techniques already described. *Feliway Classic* is available as both a plug-in diffuser and a spray.

## CHOOSING A CAT SCRATCHER TIPS:

- **Ensure scratching posts are rigid as cats need resistance when they scratch to maintain their claws.**
- **Make sure the scratcher is tall enough for your cat to scratch at full stretch. If you buy a kitten scratcher, remember to replace with a bigger one as your cat grows.**
- **Provide opportunities for your cat to scratch both horizontal and vertical surfaces.**
- **If your scratcher is a tall modular type with various platforms or bed attachments, then ensure it is stable. Many cats like to jump up cat trees at speed, so an unstable one may result in injury, and highly likely an aversion to being used by your cat. Using brackets to fix the unit to a wall can help provide stability.**

If you have any questions about your pets, call us on 01325 620968 or ask a member of our team