

Alternatives to Declawing your Cat

Scratching can be a very frustrating cat behavior, but before you decide to declaw the kitty that has made your favorite chair his/her favorite scratching post, consider some environmental control and behavior modification techniques. Remember, scratching is a natural feline behavior (even declawed cats still "scratch"), so the action cannot be prevented altogether. Fortunately, there are several alternatives to declawing that may help you cope.

Environmental control means changing the layout in the room where your cat lives. For example, you can temporarily cover the furniture that the cat likes to scratch with double-sided sticky tape or aluminum foil. You can also temporarily remove expensive furniture until the cat is retrained. Since scratching is normal behavior, you should bring in alternatives for the cat to scratch, like kitty trees, scratching posts or cardboard planks treated with catnip.

Behavior modification consists of training cats and kittens to avoid certain scratching sites while teaching them to enjoy scratching on appropriate surfaces. It is ideal to train cats while they are still kittens as it is always easier to teach desired behaviors early than to undo bad habits later. Keep in mind, however, that retraining is possible, even in senior cats.

There are several different types of scratching materials available—like carpet, sisal rope, cardboard and wood—so the first step will be figuring out what your cat likes. If your cat seems uninterested in the scratching area, you can train him/her by placing catnip, toys or treats near or on the post. If he/she scratches or paws at the post, quickly reward with a treat.

Behavior modification also involves training cats to allow people to handle their feet and trim their nails. This is done by pairing these actions with things the cat loves, like a delicious treat reserved only for nail trimming. Start slowly at first and do only what the cat will tolerate. Gradually, as the cat relaxes and looks forward to the treat, it will be possible to get more done in one session.

Make sure the cat is hungry, as this will be a great motivator. Once the cat begins eating, you can start to handle his/her feet, but only so long as he/she stays focused on the food. When you stop handling, remove the food as well so the cat will associate handling with the treat. Repeat this in short, frequent sessions while increasing time and roughness. Eventually, you will add the feel of the clippers, but be sure to stay below the level of handling that causes your cat to react. It can take a week or two before a cat will allow nail trimming, depending on how frequently you practice.

If you are uncomfortable with trimming, you may find success by simply covering your cat's nails. Soft Paws, sold in most pet supply stores, are small vinyl caps that adhere to your cat's claws. The caps are easy to apply (cats tolerate them surprisingly well) and will protect you and your furniture without putting your cat through surgery.

For more information on alternatives to declawing, contact Hope Animal Medical Center at 706-546-7879