

Teaching Your Cat to Use a Scratching Post

Scratching is normal cat behavior. Cats need to scratch to groom their front claws, leave markers of their presence, and also to help stretch their muscles. It is much easier to teach your new cat or kitten what to scratch, rather than what not to scratch. A good scratching post is a definite need. This doesn't mean that we all need to purchase the deluxe scratching posts from the local pet store! What it does mean is that there are several features and materials that make up successful, well-used scratching posts.

A good scratching post or tree will have these elements in common:

- Both vertical and horizontal surfaces. Most cats prefer to scratch vertically, but some prefer a horizontal surface.
- Heights of 2-3 times the length of your cat's body. For cats that like to stretch while scratching, the height of the post will make it an attractive scratch area.
- A solid base to prevent tipping. If the post doesn't have a broad enough base, or if the base is not secure, your kitty could end up under a fallen post. This is very frightening, and many cats would no longer use the scratch post.
- The scratching material of preference. This may be wood, sisal rope, carpet or rough fabric.

Teach your cat to use the post as soon as you get the cat or kitten. Dangle and dance toys part way up the scratching post, rub catnip on the post, scratch the post yourself for the kitten to mimic, and hold treats partway up to entice the cat to paw at. Always praise and treat the cat or kitten for approaching, touching or scratching at the post.

Cats often scratch and stretch after sleeping, so locate the post in a favorite napping area. If you have built or purchased a scratching post with shelves or 'branches' on it, place this near a window to encourage use of the post for 'cat'-napping. Height is an important social tool for cats. In households with multiple cats, scratching trees with shelves at different heights and a hiding cave at the bottom become social centers for play, scratching and, if near a window, a place to watch the world go by.

If your cat is already scratching furniture or carpet, there are some things you can do to discourage this inappropriate scratching. First, you must provide an appropriate scratching post. Buy or build a scratching post that is similar to the furniture being scratched. If the cat prefers wood to scratch, a carpeted post might not work. After a scratching post has been provided, follow the steps above to make it attractive. Now, make the old areas unattractive. Plastic wrap or double-sided tape over the old sites feels bad instead of rewarding. Shaking a can of pennies to startle and distract the cat, followed by treats at the new scratch post can be effective also. Some cats need to be confined to an area with the new post and no other scratching choices to train them to make good choices.