

Northwoods Humane Society – Lisa Lew, Assistant Shelter Manager

SCRAAAAATCHHH!! If you are my age, you might think that was either the sound of nails on a chalkboard, or the needle of your stereo pulling across an album. Hopefully, it is not the sound of your couch being destroyed by your sweet and loving cat! All cats, whether they are wild big cats, or domestic cats, have the innate desire and need to scratch. This behavior can test your patience, but only if you do not understand their need to do it, and how to make appealing places in your home for them to do it. Oftentimes, people purchase scratching posts that appeal to them, instead of buying one that their cat would actually use. One key to solving a so-called behavior problem is to understand the reason why your cat wants to do something. If you can change your way of looking at the problem, and realize that scratching in itself is really not bad behavior, it is the location being chosen that is unacceptable to you. We should never try to stop cats from scratching altogether because it is normal and natural behavior for them. Cats are not trying to mess with you, or cause you headaches, they are just doing what comes naturally to them. Your job as a good cat owner is to create a better option for your cat that you are happy having them use. Scratching is beneficial for many different reasons. As the cat scratches claws down a rough surface, the dead outer sheath of the nail comes off. Scratching is really not a means to sharpen claws. Another benefit to scratching is that it leaves the cat's scent on the scratching post. Leaving scent on territory is an important part of a cat feeling comfortable in their surroundings. If the area smells like them, then other cats will know who lives there. People think about dogs being territorial, but cats are very territorial as well, and scratching leaves visual cues that signal ownership. Big cats like lions will scratch trees and leave huge, deep gouges so there is no question about who lives there! Cats have scent glands in their paws, so as they are scratching, that scent is left on the surface. Nothing makes a cat feel at home like having lots of things around them that smell like them. Scratching is an important way for cats to relieve frustration and anxiety. Another very important benefit of scratching is that it helps to keep the cat limber and flexible. Cats love to reach up above their heads and get a big, long scratch that stretches the muscles of the back and front legs. This is why it is so important that a scratching post be tall enough that the cat can reach over its head, and that it is not wobbly. Cats also appreciate scratching surfaces on the floor like cardboard scratchers that lay horizontally, and some people even bring a small piece of a tree trunk into their home for the cat to destroy! Trimming your cat's toenails will also help to prevent some destructive scratching. Cats will still feel the need to scratch, but with shorter nails, the scratching will not be as severe. Getting your cat used to this procedure is not as difficult as it seems, and most vet techs or shelter staff would be happy to show you a safe and effective method for doing this. If you have provided appropriate scratching locations, and your cat is using a location that you do not want them using, then you must direct the cat to the location you want them to use, while making the other location undesirable. In order to scratch something like a chair, the cat would need to stand in a particular place, so putting down something uncomfortable in that place will help to deter the cat. Many people have success with upside-down carpet runners that have the little nubs on them, or crinkly paper or material. While you are making one area unappealing, you must be sure you have an acceptable alternative for your cat to use. Most cats love the texture of sisal rope because of its roughness. Rubbing catnip on the post will help to get them interested, and playing with a feather toy by the post can get them started. If your cat's scratching post has seen better days, do not be tempted to replace it right away. Your cat has invested a lot of time and energy into making that post

an important possession, so keep the old one, but place a new one next to it. Resist the urge to place the cat's paws directly on the post because we all know that cats want to think whatever they do was strictly their idea. Praise your cat when it uses a scratching post by giving a high-value treat. When cats are reprimanded for exhibiting normal behaviors, they will become frustrated, confused, and potentially afraid of you. They will continue to scratch, but will wait until you are not around. Try to make note of where and when your cat is scratching. Many cats like to scratch right after waking from a nap, or right after eating. Some cats will scratch when you arrive home because they are excited and happy to see you. Place the scratching posts in the areas where the cat spends most of its time. Providing a variety of scratching options for your cat should help to keep everyone happy.

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