

Scratching: Kitty Yoga

Cats love to stretch and scratch. All that pulling, stretching, and working the muscles is like kitty yoga, helping to keep the cat in good physical condition. Scratching also serves another purpose—to mark territory. The claw marks and the scent left by the glands in the cat's soft pads leave a message to others that this area is taken and off limits.

Unfortunately, this necessary kitty yoga can be destructive when a cat is living indoors and using the couch or rug as a scratching post. Many people decide to declaw a cat in order to end this destructive activity. It's important to understand that declawing is not just the removal of the claw, but the amputation of the cat's toe at the last joint. On a human hand, this would be the equivalent to amputating the knuckle just below the nail. Ouch! Not a pleasant thought. Plus declawing can cause behavior problems as cats often use their teeth more when they don't have claws. The following are alternatives to declawing that will make both humans and cats happy.

- 1. Make an attractive scratching post:** Since scratching is a natural cat activity, it is important that you show the cat where he can scratch. Tree stumps, branches, or rug-covered posts are all very attractive to cats. Make sure that the apparatus is tall enough for the cat to fully extend his body as he stretches. Put the scratching post in the area where the cat is scratching the most. Better yet, have several around the house.
- 2. Show where to scratch:** Whenever the cat scratches in an inappropriate place, do not punish her. Simply pick her up and redirect her to scratch on her new scratching post. Entice the cat to the scratching post by playing with attractive toys and feeding her by the post. If the cat loves catnip, rub some catnip on the post as a way to reward your cat for going to that area and provide her with positive reinforcement for returning there.
- 3. Make old areas unattractive to scratch:** If your cat refuses to give up old scratching areas, cover them with double-sided sticky tape, tin foil, or bubble wrap--all undesirable surfaces for scratching. Squirt citrus spray in the old scratching areas to avert the cat from her own scent. Cats dislike citrus smells and will avoid these areas.
- 4. Nail clipping:** Clipping the tips off the cat's claws will help cut down on the damage done when cats do scratch. Get the cat used to having her paws touched first to make your job easier. Play with her feet while cuddling with her. Squeeze that cat's pad with your thumb and finger to push the claw out of the sheath. Then when you do cut the nails, just clip the tips avoiding the pink vein that runs down the claw. If your furry friend doesn't like to be held, you will want to get a friend to help wrap her in a towel while you cut the nails.
- 5. Eliminate Stress:** Stress can cause a cat to suddenly start marking territory. Moving furniture around the room may cause a cat to feel as if he needs to mark his territory all over again. A new cat in the neighborhood can cause a cat to mark his territory even if he's is an indoor cat. Changes in the household—a new baby, someone moved in or out, new animals are all stresses that cats may react to. Try to prepare your cat in advance for any of these changes and gradually allow him to get used to changes. Some cats need to be kept in a smaller portion of the house as changes occur and then slowly allowed more freedom.
- 6. Feliway Sprays:** Available in many pet stores, Feliway is a product that uses calming, pheromone-like substances that help reduce instinctive urges of marking. If your cat is clawing to mark territory, this spray may help calm your cat and lessen the need for obsessively marking territory. Feliway comes in a spray or a plug-in dispenser.