



Destructive Scratching/Chewing

Most destructive behavior from cats is a result of a lack of appropriate outlets for natural feline behaviors, such as hunting and scratching. If cats lack an appropriate way to channel such behaviors, then they will use whatever they have—which often ends up being our furniture or legs! Cats will also commonly play with and/or tear up paper, plastic, or fabric items. They are often easily accessible and a lot of fun, as your cat can bite and shred them, make noise, kick them around, and so much more. This behavior may also be due to what's called "plucking." Plucking is a predatory behavior (like plucking the feathers off a bird they just caught) and can be very fun and satisfying for your cat. As long as your cat is not being destructive with this behavior—**or ingesting non-food items**—then it should be a fun source of enrichment!

However, if your cat is actually **consuming** these items, then your cat **may** have a serious medical condition. The eating of non-food items is called **Pica** and can be brought on by different factors. Some causes of Pica may be lack of nutrition, medical issues, and stress or anxiety. If your cat is ingesting non-food items, you should speak with your vet as soon as possible to rule out any medical causes for the behavior. Depending on what and how much your cat is eating, these non-food items could also cause blockages in their digestive tract, which could be serious for their health and costly to remedy.

Daily playtime is a must for cats. Find the type of play your cat likes best—jumping up in the air after wand toys, chasing after string toys on the ground, or pouncing on and kicking plush toys! Ditch the food bowl as well, and use enrichment feeders, such as small toys to put food in and hide around the house so that a cat can use their natural prey drive to hunt their meals!

Cats scratch to leave their scent and to stretch their claws—it feels good! Instead of trying to eliminate this incredibly socially important behavior, we should provide appropriate alternatives instead.

There are a variety of different types of scratching surfaces that scratching posts are made of (cardboard, sisal, rope, etc), and both vertical and horizontal ones, so find out what your cat prefers! This may require quite a bit of trial and error, so look for cheaper solutions until you find what your cat prefers!



THIS, not THAT (“Yes” and “No”)...

If your cat is scratching furniture and you’ve given them plenty of different types of scratching surfaces, extra playtime and/or enrichment, then consider using something like aluminum foil, upside down carpet runner (with nubs), double sided tape, or bitter spray in the areas where your cat is scratching inappropriately.

→ **However, every time we say “no,” we must provide a “yes.”**

This means if you put hard plastic or aluminum foil over the cat’s favorite spot to scratch the couch, then you must provide an alternative—such as a brand new scratching post or rug. Otherwise, your cat will go right back to scratching the area as soon as you uncover it. If they don’t seem to want to scratch the new scratcher, try adding catnip to it, or playing with them/giving them treats/doing their favorite activity on it, to form positive associations. There are some spray products that claim to attract cats to scratch on surfaces it’s applied to that may help if catnip doesn’t do it. Also, **any time a cat scratches an appropriate object (such as their posts or trees), give them treats or playtime, whichever they value most!** Use this same process in relation to chewing inappropriate objects. You can also coat appropriate chew objects in catnip or juices from wet food, if possible, to help the cat choose them over other objects.

→ **Never punish a cat.** Punishing a cat, even in the midst of their actions, hardly ever solves the problem, as your cat will merely learn to partake in undesirable behaviors when you aren’t around, and will grow to be fearful of you in the long run.

Declawing

Declawing is *never* a valid solution for inappropriate scratching. The practice of declawing is becoming more widely rejected by animal welfare groups and organizations, veterinary practices, and is even being banned by cities, counties, states, and entire countries to perform the procedure as education about the surgery continues to grow.

Declawing involves an amputation of the entire toe joint, not just the claw, and declawed cats are often left in pain due to nail regrowth, potential debris left inside the surgical site, infection, arthritis due to the change in spine angle, and more.

The AWLA does not recommend declawing a cat for any reason other than due to a medical condition that may deem the procedure to be necessary. It is common for declawed cats to develop behavioral issues as a result of being declawed. If you have a cat who is declawed, some common behavior issues may include:

- **Eliminating outside of the litter box**

If any of the medical issues above occur, then elimination can become painful. If elimination becomes painful for a cat, they may begin to associate the pain with the litter box, rather than the act of elimination itself. They will then choose to try a different area, or substrate, until they find something that does not hurt, so you may find them starting to eliminate in various different and changing places. Pain medication for management of pain can sometimes remedy house soiling. X-rays can also be performed to determine if there are fragments or an infection in your cat’s paws. If so, then a veterinary surgeon may be able to perform another surgery to clean the paws up and reduce the pain.

- **Fearful behavior**

Without their front claws, cats have one less means to defend themselves, as well as removing their ability to climb vertical spaces, thus removing an ability and avenue of escape for them. This can lead to fearful behavior and often make a cat that either was or would have otherwise been social instead fearful and avoidant of people, other cats, and new situations.

- **Aggression**

Similar to the reasons for fearful behavior, aggression may occur if the cat is either in pain and/or feels as though they cannot defend themselves with their paws, so they may be quicker to resort to biting.

- **General anxiety**

In addition to potential pain and fearful behavior, cats who have been declawed cannot climb vertical spaces. This takes away a main escape route for cats. Cats also enjoy stretching and scratching as a stress reliever (much like dogs enjoy to chew) and climbing up to perch and rest in high places. Declawing removes the ability for cats to do these things, which may lead to increased generalized stress/anxious behavior.

If the situation becomes this desperate or urgent, rubber claw caps may be purchased and glued to the nails by a vet. They will only have to be removed and replaced every few weeks. You can also keep your cat's nails trimmed to avoid furniture (or skin!) damage.

Feliway

Feliway is a product that mimics the pheromones released by cats when they are calm and secure, like when mothers are nursing their kittens. This smell is associated with happiness and comfort for cats and tends to promote calm, relaxed behavior, so it can help reduce stress and anxiety if this is a contributor to your cat's scratching behavior. Feliway brand makes diffusers that you can plug into your outlets (one diffuser covers up to 700 sq ft) or spray that you can put directly onto the surface you want your cat to scratch.



Enrichment

When most people think of cats, they think of the lazy furrball who spends 18 hours a day posted up on the couch, sleeping, low-maintenance and independent, able to entertain themselves, and who are capable of going days or weeks without needing anything from people other than food, water and a clean litter box. Some cats do in fact fit this description, while others are far from it. In fact, most cats are very human-social and need quite a bit from us on a daily basis.

In addition to keeping the food and water bowls full and the litterbox up to code, many cats require daily human interaction and entertainment that only we can provide. If your cat is a troublemaker and does things like knock items over, scratch furniture, play rough with you and other people, bully the other pets in the home, etc., then you may have a cat who is bored and frustrated and who is creating their own fun and activity. And when cats get bored, they rarely decide to do something we find productive, like balance our checkbook or do our Instacart shopping for us. Check out these enrichment ideas below and see if they do the trick for you and your cat. You may find that your cat loves all of these things, or that they may only like some. Trial and error to determine what they may like is expected, so don't get discouraged if your cat

isn't too interested in the first couple things you try!



Puzzle Toys

Whether you use it to feed full meals or just some treats during the day, puzzle toys are a great brain game for cats. They can range anywhere from comically simple to extraordinarily complicated, so trial and error is to be expected to find where within that range your cat may lie. A quick internet search will yield you thousands of results, from factory-made to DIY. We'd recommend beginning simple, and then working your way up as your cat solves the puzzles. We'd also recommend trying some DIY puzzles first before spending too much money on store bought toys that your cat might not play with.

Busy Boxes/Bags

Cats love boxes and bags! Even just giving them a box or a bag (**paper, not plastic**, and cut any handles off to prevent potential choking hazards) is usually enriching enough for them, but you can add some catnip or treats and/or put some wadded up paper or tissue paper inside too for a field day!



Cat Grass

Providing more of a nutritional boost than mental, cat grass is still a fun thing for your cat to have, chew on and play with. Not to be confused with catnip, cat grass is its own separate entity and very easy to grow yourself either outside or indoors.

Catnip

Catnip is likely the most popular enrichment given to cats. It's cheap, easy to obtain and makes for a ton of really funny videos and moments. While catnip is great for some cats, we would not recommend giving catnip if your cat is already a high-energy, easily excitable cat, as it could amplify the behavior.



Visual Enrichment

Visual enrichment is especially recommended if your cat was ever an outdoor cat who now lives inside, though anyone can enjoy this just the same. Cats, at their core, are hunters, and they love to watch birds, squirrels and other critters go on about their day. If you have a window in your home that has good wildlife traffic, then give your cat access to it whenever they please, so they can perch and enjoy the show. If you don't have windows in your home for your cat to access, then you can pull up videos on YouTube on either your phone or TV for them to watch. Just search "bird videos for

cats," and you'll get an array of results.

Vertical Space

Cats love to climb, and they'll often hide up high if/when they feel like they need or want to remove themselves. Having a number of vertical space options is crucial for many cats' happiness and can be obtained by having cat trees available, shelves for your cat to jump and rest on, access to taller furniture, etc. You may find that your cat prefers to eat their meals up in one of these higher spaces as well.

Interactive Play with Cats

The following protocol will help give you some tips and tricks on the best toys to use, what to avoid, and set some rules for the game that will benefit both you and your cat so you'll both get the most out of each session. Additionally, if your cat likes to play, then it could be a great form of enrichment, and often even solve many behavior problems.

Notes:

- Be sure to use appropriate toys, such as toys on lures or wands—anything that keeps the toy away from your hand so they're not in the line of fire!
- **Never encourage your cat to play with or use your hands or feet as a toy**—this can lead to aggressive behavior towards hands/feet.
- Set a timer for ten minutes to ensure that the cat is getting a good amount of play time. Have some treats (or their meal) ready to give at the end of the session.
- Stop the first time your cat moves away or shows any signs of anxiety or arousal.
- Never use laser pointers as toys. Many cats will chase the laser pointers, but without there being a tangible object for the cat to catch, it can actually create frustration and over-arousal. Imagine trying to hold on to smoke without understanding that just because you can see it doesn't mean there's something to touch.



Teaching the Behavior:

1. Find a lure or wand toy that your cat likes. There are different types of interactive/wand toys that mimic different types of prey, and you should try each type to see what your cat engages with best!
 - a. Bird-type wand toys have feathers, strings, etc and are meant to be dangled in the air
 - b. Snake-type toys are long and thin and are meant to be drug along the ground
 - c. Small prey (ex. mouse)-type toys are small toys on the end of strings, also meant to be drug along the ground
2. Set a timer for 10 minutes. This gives the cat a good amount of time to engage in the game and get a good session without building stamina which could have an adverse effect in the long run.
3. Move the toy along the ground, flick it up in the air, and move it erratically (start and stop multiple times). When you stop and hold the toy still, this is the time the cat gets to think about their next move (they often do the hunting crouch and maybe wiggle their rears!), so be sure you hold it still every now and then for several seconds! Don't move it in a predictable pattern—that's not how prey moves! Most cats have a preference for the type of movement (on the ground in front of them, around them, in the

air, etc).

4. Do your best to keep the toy moving AWAY from the cat. Think about how a prey animal such as a bird or a mouse would act if there was a cat around. They would never move directly towards the cat or climb on top of the cat, or boop them on the nose, etc. We want to try and make the game as realistic as possible so the cat will engage.
5. Wait for your cat to come out and chase after the toy. Be patient; many cats will take a few moments to minutes to stay back and watch the toy first. This is okay; watching and observing is part of the game! This is how cats hunt, and it is enrichment in itself.
6. When the cat does come to catch the toy, keep it moving, and try to find a good balance between allowing them to catch it and continuing to move it away from them. It's okay if the toy "gets away" as not every hunt is successful, but we want to still allow the cat to have success to keep them engaged.
7. Once the 10 minute timer is up, end the session by allowing the cat to catch the toy, and then drop treats or their meal next to the toy. Once the cat starts eating, remove the toy and end the session. This completes the hunt sequence, offers a conclusive end to the session and helps prevent the cat from being frustrated.

Happy Cat Checklist

Food

- Provide **nutritional** food with serving sizes suited to your cat's age and weight.
 - Look for a whole meat like chicken or fish (not "meal" or "by-products") as the first ingredient.
 - Avoid foods with a lot of fillers like corn, wheat, and other grains.
- If your cat can regulate their own food intake, free feeding/grazing may be the best option. If not (many cats will overeat with free feeding), provide your cat multiple small meals a day.
- Provide multiple food bowls in multiple **different** locations for a multi-cat household.
- Food bowls/feeders should be in a separate room, or separate area of the same room if space is an issue, as water bowls/fountains or litter boxes.
- Feed your cat with interactive/puzzle feeders instead of bowls (*if your cat enjoys them*)!

Water

- Use either a bowl or a fountain, whichever your cat prefers.
 - Ceramic and stainless steel are easier to clean than plastic, but experiment with which texture your cat prefers (if any).
- Water bowls should be low and broad enough that your cat doesn't bump their whiskers (which can be very uncomfortable and/or startling to some cats!).
- Water bowls shouldn't be near food bowls or litter boxes.
- Provide **multiple** water bowls/fountains in multiple **different** locations throughout the house.
- Provide **fresh** water **every day**.

Litter Boxes

- Keep litter boxes clean (scoop **every day** and deep clean once a month)!
- **No self-cleaning litter boxes!**
- Use the litter substrate that your cat prefers (*typically*, the finer and more sand-like the better).
- *Most* cats find litter box liners aversive.
- Don't use strong scented litter or cleaners on (or near) litter boxes to deep clean them (just soap and hot water is best).
- Provide multiple litter boxes—even with only one cat—distributed in multiple **different** locations across home.
 - General recommendation is one **more** than the amount of cats
- Provide a litter box that is big enough and deep (or shallow for older/injured/disabled cats) enough for your specific cat.
 - Most cats prefer 1-2 inches of litter substrate, but some cats may prefer **more** or **less**.
 - If your cat has very low mobility and/or can't step up at all, consider potty pads (or anything else that is flush with the ground) with some litter sprinkled on top of them.
- *Most* cats prefer a litter box without a flap or even a cover.
- Place litter boxes in quiet, low traffic, but **open and easily accessible**, locations (not in corners or end of hallways or in areas with loud appliances like laundry rooms or kitchens)

Scratching

- Provide scratching boards, posts, or trees that are tall/long enough for your cat to **fully stretch out their whole body/legs**.
- Provide scratching boards/posts/trees that are **sturdy** and **stable** (most cats won't use them if they wobble or fall over at all).
- Provide multiple **different scratching surface options** (the most common materials for scratching are *sisal*, *carpet*, and *corrugated cardboard*).
- Provide both **horizontal** and **vertical** scratching options.

Play

- Provide at least one **interactive** play session daily (two or more for more active cats).
- Play should be interactive and challenge your cat to use their **natural hunting skills**.
- Self-play toys should be switched out regularly to retain interest.
- Provide appropriate enrichment to encourage species-specific behavior ("cat TV," window access, food puzzles, enclosed patios, etc).

Mental and Physical Health

- Your cat should go to the vet for a yearly checkup and recommended vaccines (and is kept on heartworm and flea prevention).
 - Spend time introducing your cat to nail trims/medical procedures and handling **gradually** and **with treats** to make a positive association.
- Your cat should have **agency** (opportunities to make choices) in their daily life (always in interacting with other people/pets, but also with things like food/play choices).
- Your cat's daily life, **and the way in which everyone interacts with them**, should be as **routine** and **predictable** as possible.
- Your cat should have safe spaces to hide (like covered beds/boxes), and access to **elevated** spaces (perches, shelves, trees, etc).

Healthy Relationships

- Provide **separate** resources (food, water, litter boxes, sleeping areas/beds) for **each cat** in your household.
- Be aware of your cat's body language and respect their boundaries (don't touch/interact with them if they don't want you to, and stop petting when they tell you they're done).
 - Don't pick your cat up if they don't want to be picked up.
- Never **punish** your cat (yelling, hitting/"spanking," spraying with water, etc).
 - This usually does not stop unwanted behavior and will most likely make your cat behave aggressively towards you, or even people in general, in the future.