
Claws

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They serve as hooks, crampons, switchblades and chisels. A cat's claws are the Swiss Army knife of the feline toolbox. They are essential in practically every role that a cat plays.

What's the use?

For the Predator, claws hold the prey while the mighty hunter positions himself to deliver the killing bite at the back of the neck. In play behavior, the claws grip a toy while the cat rubs against it or punches it with his hind feet. For the agile Climber, claws help Sir Hillary maneuver up and along trees, bookcases and upholstered furniture. When he sinks in his claws, they help him shift his body weight to attain proper balance and secure footing. For the Communicator, claws facilitate leaving messages for other cats by scratching on surfaces. The claws engrave a visual territorial mark, while the scent glands in the paw pads brush on an olfactory mark. Last, but not least, claws are a first line of defense for the Protector. The one-paw swat is enough to send another cat out of preferred territory or to discipline the new dog. When a full-blown defense is required, she takes a position on her back with all four paws extended, claws ready for action. Claws are indispensable! Yet, in many households, a cat and his claws are separated via surgical declawing, all for the sake of the sofa. While all cats need to scratch, few need to be declawed.

Manage the damage

Most scratching needs can be met by providing suitable scratching and climbing surfaces. Sisal, fabric or rope posts at least three feet tall on sturdy bases fill the bill for many felines. Owners who have extra space and money can meet a cat's climbing and scratching needs with multi-level cat furniture, which incorporates resting and climbing platforms on tree trunk-type stilts. If a cat doesn't quickly catch on to your preferred scratching areas, a few incentives may help. Low-cost corrugated cardboard scratch boxes anointed with catnip can draw cats away from previously preferred sofa arms, especially if those arms are temporarily covered with industrial-strength plastic sheeting. Adding strips of double-stick masking tape over the plastic increases its repulsiveness to the cat.

Solution in a snip

Through the years, a number of individuals have called the ASPCA Behavior Help line because they were considering declaw surgery. When asked how often they trim their cat's nails, almost every caller has responded, "Never." Coincidence? I think not! If claws are kept blunt, a cat who strays from the scratching post from time to time will do little to no damage. You can get results without surgery by cutting the nails every two to three weeks. If you have never given a cat manicure, here are a few tips:

- If possible, start trimming the claws when your cat is young. As soon as kittens leave their littermates they are ready for nail trimming, so try to begin the routine no later than 10 to 12 weeks of age.
- Make it pleasant. Initially, do only a few nails at a time. Offer a food reward or scratch the cat in his favorite spots; then let him go.
- If you can't make it fun, make it fast. If you have an older cat that has already made up her mind against manicures, the mummy method may serve you best. Wrap a thick towel around her leaving only the head exposed. Bring out one paw at a time, trimming the nails as swiftly as possible. Some caretakers find they can abandon the towel method if they schedule the manicure after a meal. If the cat is groggy from an after-dinner snooze she'll be more relaxed and easier to handle.
- Whatever your chosen technique, a pair of sharp, well-made cat nail scissors is the tool of choice. Other equipment can do the job, but a pair of scissors is the easiest to grasp when holding a squirming bundle of cat.

There's no need to fear your feline's nails. With a trimming regimen and the right equipment, you can happily co-exist with your cat's arsenal. A W