



**Does your cat scratch at the furniture, chew your belongings, dig up your plant pots or steal food? If the answer is yes then your beloved pet might be trying to get your attention, creating its own fun, or expressing anxiety. As there are many reasons for destructive behaviours, you must first understand why your cat is being destructive if you are to stop it.**

### Why is my cat destructive?

Feral domestic cats spend, on average, 8 hours hunting every day and therefore spend a lot of their mental and physical energy engaged in getting enough to eat. In contrast, pet cats get their food in a bowl, and often spend very little time getting it. Because hunting is such an important activity for cats, those that have free access to the outdoors often engage in hunting activity even though they also get fed by the owner. Domestic cats that don't go outside or have restricted access to the outside are therefore unable to show their full range of normal behaviours and may become inactive and depressed, or show signs of frustration. Cats may express their frustration through destructive behaviour.

Many owners react to their cat's destructive behaviour by chasing them, squirting them with water or distracting them with a toy or food. This might temporarily stop the cat's behaviour, but may actually reinforce the behaviour in the long term. Cats soon learn that if they are destructive their owner engages in an even more exciting game with them. In cats where this learning occurs, their destructive behaviour can become a strategy for gaining the owner's attention.

To prevent cats becoming frustrated you must keep their environment as stimulating as possible. Try to replace all the things that your cat would do if it was outside - provide opportunities for play, maximise the use of 3-Dimensional space, and making it 'work' for its food.

### How can I stop my cat from being destructive?

Play is a great way of using up a cat's energy and you can encourage your cat to use its natural hunting instincts by providing toys that stimulate stalking and chasing behaviour. Objects that are small, have a complex surface texture and move will be of most interest to cats. Independent play is good as it means that your cat can do things when you are out or busy, eg toys can be hung up in front of windows so any draught causes the toy to move about and get the cat's attention. You should play with your cats as much as possible, eg with 'fishing-rod' toys. Toys should be changed regularly to keep them exciting. Do not play with your cat using feet or hands as this may encourage inappropriate play, where the cat will use his teeth and claws on parts of the human body.

You can also make feeding time more active. Giving cats their dried food in puzzle feeders instead of in bowls means that they have to work to get the food out. Puzzle feeders can be bought from pet shops, or you can make your own by cutting holes, just bigger than dried cat biscuits, in a small plastic drinks bottle and filling it with dried food. As the cat taps the bottle across the floor bits of food drop out. Alternatively, you can hide bits of food inside scrunched up pieces of paper around the house so that your cat has to search for and then manipulate them to get to the food. To get a cat used to this idea start by placing the dry food just next to the bowl and gradually increase the distance of the food from the bowl until it is eventually scattered throughout the house. Making your cat work for his food like this will mean that much more of his time will be taken up 'hunting' for his food, rather than just eating straight from a bowl.

Cats also love to move around in 3 dimensions (on all levels), so try to make your cat's environment more exciting by providing shelves at different levels that they can jump onto. Most cats enjoy climbing and jumping and will spend a lot of time on elevated areas, which they use as vantage points from which to survey their surroundings. Being able to escape to a high place is especially important for cats in households containing more than one cat. Constructions ranging from simple scratching posts with a shelf to complex structures with lots of shelves, beds and scratching posts will satisfy a cat's desire to climb, jump, scratch and rest. Cats also like to explore and hide so giving them boxes, even cardboard ones, will provide extra stimulation and comfort.

Scratching posts should have a vertical grain as cats prefer to run their claws down the thread rather than across it. The scratching posts must also be tall enough to allow the cat a full stretch and be steady enough not to topple over when he leans into it. If the scratching posts fulfil these criteria then hopefully the cat will not feel the need to scratch the back of the sofa!



**Are there other reasons for my cat to be destructive?**

Scratching is a normal cat behaviour and is used for both marking and sharpening nails. However, some cats scratch the furniture, or performing other destructive behaviours, as a result of anxiety. Therefore, simply providing a more stimulating environment might not be enough to stop a cat from scratching.

**Should I punish my cat for his destructive behaviour?**

Punishing a cat for being destructive will not necessarily stop the destructive behaviour. It is more important to address the reasons why the cat shows the behaviour in the first place. Punishment might also damage your relationship with your cat and make him anxious when you are around. Some punishments might even be rewarding for the cat; an under-stimulated cat might find it fun to be chased around the house or sprayed with water! Similarly other techniques, such as distracting a cat with a toy or food will only reward the destructive behaviour and teach the cat that being destructive is a good thing!

**If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact Unicorn Vets on 023 8034 3434 and we will be happy to advise you.**