

Humane Society of West Michigan

Cat Behavior

Cats need to scratch, play, hunt, hide, sleep and have social interaction. Cats are by nature curious and adventuresome. They can get into places you would not imagine and make toys out of the least likely items. Many cat behaviors are similar to those you would observe in wild felines (lions, tigers, cougars). They sleep, hunt, stalk, chase, scratch, bite and watch.

Scratching

Scratching is a normal behavior and can be directed to appropriate places. Your cat scratches not only to clean away scales from its nails but also to mark territory. Try providing your cat with a variety of scratching options such as a rope scratching post, a log with the bark intact, a cardboard box, etc.

Put the scratching post near a favorite sleeping place as cats love to stretch and scratch after a nap. Reinforce his good behavior by praising him whenever he uses appropriate places. Put catnip on the “right” scratch-ing item. If you catch him scratching the furniture, try a water spray bottle, set on stream. Only punish the behavior, not the cat (that is, catch him in the act). If the cat just loves scratching one corner of your couch, for example, place something there to block access like plastic carpet protectors turned upside down with the little spikes facing outward to discourage cats from walking over them. You can also use tin foil or double sided sticky tape.

Declawing

There are many alternatives to declawing. Declawing is the amputation of the entire last digit of the cat’s toes. Declawing includes severing of ligaments and tendons, which can be painful.

Cat owners have reported having to change cat litter as some declawed cats find clay litter painful and may stop covering their litter. Declawing can also cause impaired balances, increased stress because they cannot defend themselves, or injury during a fall because they cannot grip anything. Declawed cats may also be quicker to bite.



If you would like to leave your cat with its claws, use these simple alternatives:

- Keep claws trimmed—carefully trim the tips off the nails being careful not to cut the quick (the vein that runs down the nails). We are happy to show you how to do this! You can also ask your veterinarian to instruct you so that you can do this at home, or take your pet to a groomer.
- You can buy nail sheaths; little plastic caps that fit over the nails to prevent scratching. These have been used successfully by many people.
- Train your cat to use the alternate scratching posts that you have provided.

Biting

Some cats are gentle while others are rowdy with nipping/biting. Choose a cat that will work well in your household. Biting, even while playing, is natural. You can avoid getting your hand bitten by not using your hand as a toy for the cat.

Biting may also be saying that your cat has had enough petting or playing. So stop what you are doing and leave the kitty alone.

Stroking your cat near its tail and on the belly may also elicit biting behavior. Avoid petting in that area as biting is a natural reaction to that stimulation.

You can retrain kitty by playing gently and using toys.

Playing

Buy or make a few cat toys. Playing and hunting desires can be closely related. A nice mouse toy can be used for a fun chase game, and allowing the cat to catch the toy mouse will help satisfy hunting desires. Most cats will play with anything that moves!

When you play, be sure to avoid wrestling or roughhousing with your hands. Otherwise, it teaches the cat that it's all right to use claws and teeth on you.



Avoid string, wool, curling ribbon, (used for gift packages), or anything similar, as cats can ingest these substances and cause serious internal problems.

If you work all day, greet your cat affectionately when you arrive home and give him a few minutes of your undivided attention. Allow your pet to be with you in the evening. A brief play period and just being petted every evening will keep him happy. Set time aside for longer play periods. Many behavior issues are avoided by spending quality time with your cat.



Be aware of normal cat behavior.

Part of playing with your cat may include mock hunting: stalking, ambushing and pouncing. These can be delightful antics to watch, but be aware that anything that moves may become a target (including you).

Cats also incorporate climbing and leaping into play routines. A young or determined cat can jump two or three times his body length. Cats desire to be on high surfaces to survey their territory for prey or intruders.





Sleeping and Relaxing

Cats love high places to perch and look out from and cozy safe places to hide and sleep. You can buy “kitty condos” or leave suitable closets open. NOTE: always check that your cat is not inside before closing pretty much anything- especially the dryer!

Letting your cat sleep on your bed and relax on your lap will add pleasure and contentment to her life and yours! (Cats can sleep as much as 18 hours a day.)

Know that your bed time may not be the same as your cat; they are largely nocturnal. Your cat’s increased activity around the bedroom or house at some early morning hour is not a behavior problem, just instinctual. Playing with your cat prior to your bed time and feeding you cat when you go to bed may help her sleep peacefully at night.

Litter Box Training

The general rule of thumb is one litter box per cat plus an extra box for insurance.

Here are some tips that will help ensure that your cat uses its litter box:

Place the litter box in a convenient location, but it must be private and quiet for the cat (a laundry room or hallway may be too noisy and busy).

Keep the boxes away from heavy traffic areas and the cat’s feeding area. Be certain a shy cat can reach the box without feeling threatened or exposed.

Scoop away waste *every day*—this makes kitty happy. Thoroughly clean the boxes once a month. Empty out all the litter, was with dish soap, and dry.

When you first arrive home with your new cat, calmly place them in the litter box a few times to be sure they know the location. Allowing the cat to watch you when you scoop the litter box has been reported to encourage the cat to jump in and use it.

You may need to experiment with different types of litter until you find one that is acceptable to your cat. Any accidents should be cleaned with an enzyme-based cleaner.

Why Is My Cat Not Using the Litterbox?

You may need to determine if the problem is inappropriate elimination or territorial marking. If your cat is marking, you will usually find the urine has been deposited on vertical surfaces, whereas inappropriate toileting is on horizontal surfaces. Each has different suggested remedies. For territorial marking (spraying), look into what has changed in your cat’s environment that may cause him or her to feel the need to assert a presence in an area. Your veterinarian should perform a health exam to rule out any underlying medical reasons for the behavior.

Possible reasons for inappropriate elimination:

- That cat has not learned the location of the litter box or forgets where it is if allowed too much house to roam. This is especially true for kittens.
- The cat may have a physiological or physical condition (illness). Any cat displaying inappropriate litter box habits should see your veterinarian right away to rule out infection or other medical issues.
- The cat may not like the brand of litter, so try some others simultaneously. Observe which one he selects.
- The litter box is not clean. Soiled areas should be removed DAILY. The entire pan should be emptied and washed at least once a month, replacing with fresh litter.
- The litter box has been disinfected with a strong smelling solution and needs to be rinsed thoroughly. Cats do not like strong smells.
- The cat is soiling an area previously used for elimination by another pet. Clean thoroughly with an enzyme-based cleaner.
- Place the food bowl on a previously soiled spot as this may deter the cat, or place another litter box on the spot.
- The location of the litter box may be unacceptable; try a new quiet area.
- Another pet may be keeping the cat away.
- Another cat is using the litter box. Some cats will not share a litter box, especially at first.
- A child or pet is terrorizing the new while you are not there, causing fear-related elimination or the cat simply may be responding to stress and family and household changes.

Be Patient and Consistent

It can take a few weeks for a cat to settle—not much to ask for a new lifelong friend and companion. NEVER punish the cat for making a mistake. This may make the problem much worse. Patience and praise work far more quickly to solve any problems.

Remember to look at our website at www.hswestmi.org for pet behavior advice and classes.



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Understanding Body Language

Cats have a varied body language. Here are some ways to read your cat's more subtle language:

Eyes

The pupils tell you a lot- watch for dilated wide pupils as this indicates fear and stress. Try to avoid petting or picking up a cat with widely dilated pupils!



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Ears

Ears flattened and pressed onto the head are expressing fear or defense.

Tail

A cat holding his tail straight up is displaying confidence and pride. A bottlebrush tail is a sign of fear/stress. Then there is the slow wave of mild annoyance and finally the slow twitching of the tail indicating your cat has had enough!



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Purring

While generally thought of as a sign of affection, purring can also indicate a serious problem. Injured cats may also purr just as much as if they are being affectionately petted. They may purr to comfort and reassure themselves when they are nervous or in pain.

On-Going Training

Cats love routine. Many do the same thing at the same time daily. Something as simple as closing the door to the room they routinely sleep in during the afternoon can cause a behavior change. Watch for these types of changes to your cat's routine when assessing a behavior problem.

The best training tools are patience and praise of the desirable behavior. If your cat continues to perform the undesirable behavior, a water spray bottle set on stream will often be sufficient. Remember to punish only the behavior, not the cat.

Dispelling Myths About Felines

There are many popular misconceptions about cats. Here are some of the common ones:

- *You should allow your female cat to have one litter before spaying her:*

FALSE. Having a litter will not only add to the high pet overpopulation problem, but having kittens can cause stress and there can be medical complications with pregnancy and birth. Remember, spay and neuter now, as cats can reproduce as young as 5-6 months of age.

- *An indoor-only female cat does not need to be spayed:*

FALSE. Not only will you experience the restlessness and noise of your cat's heat cycle but she will discover any and every way to get out of the house. Heat can be experienced as frequently as every other month.

- *A fixed cat will get fat:*

FALSE. Only a cat that eats too much and does not get enough playful exercise will get fat.

- *Only a male cat will spray:*

FALSE. Spraying is territorial marking. While usually associated with tom cats, your spayed female or neutered male may spray if she or he perceives a threat on territory.

- *Cats are street-smart and can do just fine outside:*

FALSE. Cats are domesticated pets. They face many hazards outside that can and do shorten their lives. Your cat is dependent upon you for her health, safety and survival so keep her indoors!

- *Cats are loners:*

FALSE. Cats are not anti-social animals and do want companionship. They may not desire to accompany you like a dog, but your cat will let you know when it is time for interaction and play and when it is time for solitude.