M uch as we love our cats, we could often do without their natural tendency to scratch curtains, carpets and furniture. But help could be at hand. Two new scientific studies into cat behaviour and scent communication offer not only a better understanding of cat scratching, but also the possibility of redirecting it with the right pheromone chemistry. Both studies appear in our veterinary publication, the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery.

Researchers from the University of Pisa, Italy, and the Institute of Research in Semiochemistry and Applied Etiology (IRSEA) in France, quizzed over 120 Italian cat owners about their feline friends’ behaviour. They documented each cat’s age, breed, outdoor access and whether it had a scratching post, and looked for correlations between these various factors and scratching behaviour.

The Italian study demonstrated that where there is a scratching post in the home, a cat is likely to use it. But corresponding author Manuel Mengoli (based at IRSEA) notes that a lack of attention to the fine details of a scratch post — such as location and suitability — could ‘cause cats to select walls and more attractive furniture using their own criteria’, a behaviour which usually leads to ‘expensive destruction’, he adds.

Females and neutered male cats seem less likely to scratch other indoor surfaces. Although under natural conditions unowned cats may form social groups based largely on female–female interactions, unneutered males often roam separately from these groups. Scratching is particularly important for these tom cats, and scientists believe that the visual signal of scratching, coupled with chemical signals (scent), are an important means for males to communicate with one another about territory without the need to meet and fight.

Cats scratch most along well-used routes around the home or territory, rather than at the periphery. Instead of seeing scratching as just an unacceptable behaviour, owners and vets need to understand it as a specific, but manageable aspect of normal feline activity.

But how can we redirect what is to us troublesome cat scratching behaviour? A second study in the same issue of our journal points to a possible solution. In their paper, ‘The induction of scratching behaviour in cats: efficacy of synthetic feline interdigital semiochemical,’ some of the same IRSEA researchers and their colleagues looked at feline interdigital semiochemical (FIS) — a pheromone that cats use to signal to one another.

In a blind and randomised trial, scientists led healthy cats to a scratching post test area that had either been sprayed with FIS, or a placebo, to find out how the chemical affected their behaviour.

FIS pheromone induced more and longer scratching sessions among the trial cats: ‘Using a scratching post with a chemical message to help manage scratching behaviour at home could be particularly interesting in preserving the relationship between owners and cats,’ according to Alessandro Cozzi, who led the research. It could also be useful for introducing a kitten to its new home, he adds. As Alessandro concluded: ‘The semiochemical approach can modify the choice of areas selected spontaneously by cats, and could be used either as a preventive measure for a cat arriving at home or to control or change an inappropriate scratching behaviour.’

For more information on redirecting indoor scratching behaviour go to www.icatcare.org/advice-centre/scratching-furniture-and-carpets