



Declawing Cats: Not Just a Manicure

People often mistakenly believe that declawing their cats is a harmless "quick fix" for unwanted scratching. What they don't usually know is that declawing can create lasting behavioral issues, like making a cat less likely to use the litter box or more likely to bite. Declawing can also cause lasting physical problems for your cat.

Declawing is becoming less frequent and with new information about its negative effects, many vets are opting to no longer perform the surgery. The Humane Society of the United States also discourages declawing. People who are worried about being scratched, especially those with immunodeficiencies or bleeding disorders, may be told incorrectly that their health will be protected by declawing their cats. However, infectious disease specialists don't recommend declawing. The risk from scratches for these people is less than those from bites, cat litter, or fleas carried by their cats.

When your cat scratches something, it is performing normal feline behavior. Cats don't understand that running their claws down a couch is "bad behavior" that will ruin furniture – they do it because it feels good. Cats scratch to remove the dead husks from their nails, mark territory, and stretch their muscles. Pet caregivers should not consider declawing as a routine prevention for unwanted scratching.

What is Declawing?

People often think that declawing is a simple surgery that removes a cat's nails – the equivalent of having your fingernails trimmed. Declawing actually involves the amputation of the last bone of each toe. If performed on a human being, it would be like cutting off each finger at the last knuckle. It is an unnecessary surgery that provides no medical benefit to the cat. Just as you would teach a new puppy not to use his teeth on your hand, pet parents can train their cats to use their claws in a manner that allows everyone in the household to live together happily.

How is a Cat Declawed?

The standard method of declawing is amputating with a scalpel or guillotine clipper. The wounds are closed with stitches or surgical glue, and the feet are bandaged. Another method is laser surgery, in which a small, intense beam of light cuts through tissue by heating and vaporizing it. However, it's still the amputation of the last toe bone of the cat and carries with it the same long-term risks of lameness and behavioral problems as does declawing with scalpels or clippers.

Medical Drawbacks

Some of the medical issues associated with declawing include:

- Chronic pain in the paws
- Infection, tissue necrosis (tissue death), lameness, and back pain Removing claws changes the way a cat's foot meets the ground and can cause pain similar to wearing an uncomfortable pair of shoes.
- Regrowth of improperly removed claws, nerve damage, and bone spurs

- Surgery site can be sensitive for the rest of the cat's life, especially when scratching in the box. This may lead cats to use other, soft surfaces instead of the litter box – think pillows, rugs, or beds. When declawing pain keeps a cat from using the litterbox, it is not a fixable issue.
- When a cat's nails are removed, so is their first line of defense. Cats who do not have front claws cannot protect themselves, especially if they venture into the outdoors. When scared or defensive, these cats will often bite to protect themselves. Cat bites hurt a lot worse than a scratch, and can also become infected easily.

Tips to Stop Unwanted Scratching

Just like there are ways to train a dog not to chew on household items, you can teach your cat not to scratch on furniture!

- Keep your cat's claws trimmed to minimize damage to household items.
- Provide stable scratching posts and boards around your home. Offer different materials like carpet, sisal, wood, and cardboard, as well as different styles (vertical and horizontal). Use toys and catnip to entice your cat to use the posts and boards.
- Extensive research has shown that most cats prefer scratching posts that are at least three feet tall. This allows the cat to fully stretch out his entire body.
- Make sure the scratching post is accessible to the cat. Add catnip to help entice your kitty to her new toy!
- Use positive reinforcement! When your cat scratches appropriate surfaces, reward your cat by giving him attention, praise, and even better, a treat! This is a process that takes time and consistency. With enough praise, your cat will start learning what is appropriate to scratch.
- Just like dogs have preferences on toys they like to chew on, your cat has preferences on scratching surfaces!
- Ask your veterinarian about soft plastic caps (like Soft Paws®) that are glued to the cat's nails. They need to be replaced about every six weeks.
- Cover surfaces you do not want scratched with special tape (like Sticky Paws®) or tin foil to furniture to deter your cat from unwanted scratching. Cats don't like when their paws touch these materials!

Still Having Trouble?

Give us a call! We are here to help and guide you through any issues you are having with your cat and clawing issues. And while we strive to make the right match with any adoption, if you find that you are unable to resolve your cat's scratching problem and cannot keep a cat in your home who is scratching, we are always able to take any adopted animal back into our care.

Revised: June 2020