

Facts About Declawing

There are many myths, misunderstandings, and strong opinions about declawing. If you are considering having this surgery done on your cat, please take a few minutes to learn about this major surgical procedure before you make a decision.

Many people report that they are happier with their cats after declawing, because it makes the cats "better pets." Unfortunately, many people have also discovered- too late- that declawing frequently causes far worse problems than it solves. There is no way to know ahead of time into which category your cat might fall. There are ways to solve behavior problems other than irreversible surgery.

Instead of Declawing

Scratching Posts: Put scratching posts near furniture that your cat is scratching to encourage scratching on the post and not the furniture.

Keep Nails Trimmed: Cut their nails regularly and start as young as possible to get your cat used to having their nails trimmed. You can start by trimming a few nails per session while they are napping or relaxed so they see it as something positive. Giving your cat a treat and praising them will help them associate nail trims with something positive.

Nail Caps: They are an easy alternative to declawing. They are easy to put on and are good for all ages of cats. The nail caps do not interfere with their normal retraction of their claws and stay on for about 4 to 6 weeks before falling off on their own.

Why Do Cats Scratch Things?

Cats use their claws to maintain proper condition of the nails, for fun and exercise, and to mark territory visually as well as with scent. They stretch their bodies and tone their muscles by digging their claws into something and pulling back. Scratching also helps shed their outer nail sheath to expose sharp, new claws. A cat's natural instinct to scratch serves both physical and psychological needs. House cats can be trained to satisfy their desire to claw without damaging valuable property.

Why Do People Declaw Their Cats?

By far, the most common reason given by cat owners who are considering having their pet declawed is to protect furniture or other property. Some may believe that declawing will prevent the cat from injuring them. Some veterinarians will recommend the procedure to their clients. People may report that they are happy with their cats after declawing, because it makes the cats "better pets." Unfortunately, as many people discover too late, declawing may cause far worse problems than it solves. There are many better ways to treat behavior problems other than radical and irreversible surgery.

What is Declawing?

Declawing itself is the amputation of each front toe at the first joint (hind foot declaws are not commonly done). This is equivalent to you losing the entire tip of every finger at the first knuckle. The cat loses 1/3 of its paws. The surgery is so excruciatingly painful that it is used to test the effectiveness of pain medications. Initial recovery takes a few weeks, but even after the surgical wounds have healed, there are often other long-term physical and psychological effects.

The Role of Cat's Claws

Claws perform a number of functions for the cat. By scratching various surfaces, cats create a visual and scent identification mark for their territory. Claws provide psychological comfort through kneading, help the cat climb to safety or a secure vantage point, build strength, and help the cat fully stretch his back and legs. A declawed cat never again experiences the head-to-toe satisfaction of a full body stretch. Also, the ability to retract their claws helps them with their balance and to establish footing for walking, running, springing and climbing.

Complications

Declawing is painful; and recovery can take up to a few weeks. Even after the surgical wounds have healed, there may be other long-term physical and psychological effects:

Post-surgical complications: Lameness, abscesses, and claw regrowth can occur days, weeks, or even years after surgery. Nail regrowth has been known to occur up to 15 years after surgery; and the process of regrowth is painful as it occurs.

Pain: It's impossible to know how much chronic pain and suffering declawing causes. However, in similar procedures in humans, amputees report "phantom" sensations from the amputated part, ranging from merely strange to extremely painful. Cat's behavior may appear normal, but a lack of overt signs of pain does not mean they are pain-free. Cats typically conceal pain or illness until it becomes unbearable. With moderate chronic pain, it may be that they simply learn to live with it. However, a new syndrome of "Chronic Pain of Onychectomy" has been documented to affect many cats, sometimes months or years after declawing.

Joint stiffness: In declawed cats, the tendons that control the toe joints retract after the surgery, and over time these joints become essentially "frozen". The toes can no longer be extended, but remain fully contracted for the lifetime of the cat. The fact that most cats continue to "scratch" after they are declawed is often said to "prove" that the cat does not "miss" its claws. However, this is as easily explained as the cat's desperate desire to stretch those stiff, contracted paw, leg, shoulder and spinal joints.

Arthritis: Newly declawed cats shift their body weight backward onto the large central pad of the front feet and off the toes. Over time, this altered gait causes stress on the leg joints and spine, and can lead to damage and arthritic changes in multiple joints.

Litter box problems: Experts say that declawed cats have more litter box problems than clawed cats. In one survey, 95% of calls about declawed cats related to litter box problems, while only 46% of clawed cats had such problems -- and most of those were older cats, many with physical ailments that accounted for the behavior.

Behavioral: Some cats that were friendly and lively can become introverted and withdrawn once they have been declawed. Declawing a cat can make them be in a constant state of stress which can cause them to be nervous, fearful and/or aggressive.

Biting: Deprived of claws, a cat may turn to its only other line of defense—its teeth. Some experts believe that naturally aggressive cats that are declawed are the most likely to become biters. Studies have shown that up to 18% of declawed cats either start biting or bite harder and

more often after declaw surgery.

Death: There is always a small but real risk of death from any general anesthesia, as well as from hemorrhage or other surgical complications. Many cats are abandoned or exiled to a life outdoors because of these unwanted behaviors, even though declawed cats should not be allowed outside—their ability to defend themselves, and to escape danger by climbing, is seriously impaired. Even indoor declawed cats face dangers within the home. Declawing can lead to gradual weakening of the muscles of their legs, shoulders and back, impairing their balance. A cat's surefootedness relies on their ability to grasp quickly with their claws so cats that are declawed have a higher risk of injuring themselves from falling.

Why Did My Veterinarian Suggest Declawing My Cat?

Many veterinarians in the U.S. have become accustomed to performing the declawing procedure without thinking about—or recognizing—the consequences. Some even recommend routinely declawing kittens at the same time they are spayed or neutered, whether or not they have developed destructive scratching behavior. However, top veterinary behaviorists and the American Veterinary Medical Association agree that declawing should not be considered as a routine or preventive procedure. Your veterinarian has an obligation to educate you as to the nature of the procedure, the risks of anesthesia and surgery, and the potential for complications and further unwanted behaviors.

Adopting an Already-Declawed Cat

Whether you are looking to specifically adopt a declawed cat or have fallen in love with one regardless of the cat's presence of nails or not, remember, declawed cats wind up in shelters for a variety of reasons, many of which are to no fault of their own. Not every declawed cat develops behavioral problems, but here are a few pointers to remember about your claw-less new companion.

Keep your declawed cat indoors. Declawed cats have lost the ability to climb well, hunt well, and are not typically able to defend themselves successfully. Protect them by keeping them safe indoors with lots of fun, enriching stimuli.

Offer joint supplements. Talk with your veterinarian about the appropriate time to add a joint supplement. These can be helpful to a declawed cat's stiff joints, but also to any older cat that may suffer from joint stiffness.

Offer easy access to the litter box. A low sided box with fine-grained litter will be preferable to most declawed cats. Also, make sure a litter box on each level of your house is offered, especially to an older cat that may have trouble managing stairs.