

The Problems With Declawing

For many cat owners, their pet's natural impulse to scratch can become a problem, and declawing may seem a logical solution. However, declawing creates more problems than it solves.

What exactly happens when a cat is declawed? Veterinarian Dr. Paul Rowan outlines the most common procedure used to remove claws:

- 1.The cat is given a general anesthetic.
- 2.The fur around the feet is clipped.
- 3.A tourniquet is placed around the leg.
- 4.The nails are rinsed with alcohol.
- 5.The amputation of the nail is accomplished with a guillotine nail cutter, which cuts across the first joint of the toe and may also involve the foot pad.
- 6.The toes are then bandaged tightly to prevent hemorrhage.
- 7.The bandage is removed two to three days post-operatively.

Immediate physical complications can include:

- 1.An adverse reaction to the general anesthetic, and this can include death.
- 2.If bandages are wrapped too tightly, the foot may become gangrenous and necessitate amputation of the leg.
- 3.When bandages are removed, many cats begin to hemorrhage and require rebandaging.

Later physical complications can include:

- 1.In instances in which the entire nail bed was not removed, one or more claws can grow back misshapen and useless.
- 2.Because their nails are brittle, and because the surgical nail cutter may have been dull, many cats experience shattered bones in their feet which can become seriously infected. This can be corrected only with a second general anesthetic and surgical procedure.

Declawing is a painful procedure that has long-lasting effects on cats. Once their claws have been removed, they can no longer perform their natural stretching and kneading rituals. They become weaker as they age and may experience debilitating arthritis in their backs and shoulders. Furthermore, cats without claws have lost their first line of defense, and because of this, they live in a constant state of stress. Less able to protect themselves, they cannot fight off other animals, or escape quickly from a dangerous situation. They may also become biters because they no longer can use their claws as a warning. Groomers, veterinarians, and people who care for declawed cats in shelters find many of them to be nervous, irritable, and difficult to handle.

Finally, declawed cats often stop using their litterboxes. Some apparently associate the pain they feel in their paws when trying to cover their waste with the litterbox itself. They seek a less painful place for elimination, such as the carpet or bathtub. Even though there are effective ways to modify a cat's litterbox behavior, it is a particularly difficult challenge because a declawed cat's aversion results from pain.

Instead Of Declawing...

After learning that declawing is not only a painful procedure for your cat, but actually removes a needed body part for movement and defense, most cat owners opt for alternatives to declawing. The information that follows explains the declawing procedure and provides suggestions for you to use so that you can live happily with your cat, claws and all!

THE DECLAWING PROCEDURE

The standard way to declaw a cat is to remove not only the claw, but the cells at the base of the claw, and part or all of the terminal bone of the toe. Consider it as an amputation of part of the cat's body. To better understand this, think of it as removing the last part of your finger, all the way up to the joint closest to your fingernail!

Although this is done under anesthesia, after surgery most cats act as if they are in great discomfort. The cat's feet are tightly bandaged after surgery and the cat will experience throbbing. Once the bandages are removed, the feet will be painful to walk on. In addition, there is always some risk associated with anesthesia; there may be additional risks associated with infection or blood loss.

Changes in the way your cat behaves can also occur after declawing. Some cats, aware of their loss of defense, may become unpredictably aggressive towards their owners. Some cats develop a habit of biting to offset their loss of clawing. Some cats simply become very timid. All declawed cats must remain indoors all of the time, since outdoors they are unable to climb to safety or defend themselves.

ALTERNATIVES TO DECLAWING

You can keep both a cat with claws and unclawed furniture in your home! Understanding your cat's needs will help you to supply the correct materials and training to make this situation possible.

SCRATCHING POSTS

Remember that scratching and stretching are a natural part of being a cat. You cannot punish your cat for scratching with his claws, however you can provide your cat with a place to scratch that is acceptable for both you and the cat. Here are some examples:

Either purchase a scratching post or build your own using carpet samples and wood. Some cats will accept using carpet samples tossed on the floor.

Some people prefer to get a chunk of log for their cats to scratch on - many cats love this since it feels just they're scratching on a tree! Logs can be scavenged from the woods or purchased at your local building supply store.

Some cats prefer fabric, similar to what is on your couch or favorite chair. Simply purchase fabric and use it to cover part of the scratching post.

A favorite of many cats is a scratching box that can be purchased from your local pet supply store. These inexpensive boxes are filled with corrugated cardboard and sprinkled with catnip. Cats not only love to scratch on these, but many start sleeping on them as well.

If you have several cats in your household, be sure to provide several scratching areas.

TRAINING

Cats mark their territory when they scratch: they actually release small amounts of oil or a "scent" from glands located under each claw. Therefore, it is very important to teach your cat early on where he can and cannot scratch. Once an item is marked, the cat will prefer to return and scratch there again. If you can train your cat to mark his scratching post, he will use it over and over again!

Keep a squirt bottle filled with water near areas you don't want the cat to scratch. When he approaches and starts to scratch on a "forbidden" object, startle him by squirting water on his back (never his face!). Then, simply pick the cat up and take him to his scratching post. Start to play with the cat by dragging a string on the post. When he scratches the post, give lots of praise and show excitement - your cat will love the attention and repeat this to get more attention. Constant praise will really help your cat use his post! Try spraying the post with catnip to lure your cat when you are not around.

CLAW TRIMMING

Sharp claw tips can catch on your furniture and cause it to tear. Keeping your cat's claws blunt reduces this type of damage. Trim the claws every few weeks by using a nail clipper. Make sure that your vet or groomer gives you instructions for your first time - if you cut your cat's "quick" (the pink part of the nail that has nerves and blood), you will hurt your cat and he will not want you to touch his claws again! Most cats can learn to have their claws trimmed regularly without too much fuss, as long as you provide them with gentle care.