

Caring for Cats

A no kill cat shelter and foster network in North St. Paul, MN
(651)407-8485 www.caring-for-cats.org

The Truth About Declawing

Misconceptions

Myth: Only the claws are removed.

Reality: The procedure of partial digital amputation (onychectomy) involves 10 or more amputations removing the claws and the bones from which they originate. This is comparable to the removal of human fingertips at the first knuckle. Sensory and motor nerves are cut, damaged, and destroyed.

Myth: Declawing is not a painful process.

Reality: Recovery from surgery is a slow and painful process. Dr. Nicholas Dodman, veterinarian and director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, writes in his book *The Cat Who Cried for Help: Attitudes, Emotions, and the Psychology of Cats*: *"The inhumanity of the procedure is clearly demonstrated by the nature of the cats' recovery from anesthesia following the surgery. Unlike routine recoveries, including recovery from neutering surgeries, which are fairly peaceful, declawing surgery results in cats bouncing off the walls of the recovery cage because of excruciating pain. Cats that are more stoic huddle in the corner of the recovery cage, immobilized in a state of helplessness, presumably by the overwhelming pain. Declawing fits the dictionary definition of mutilation to a tee. Words such as deform, disfigure, disjoint, and dismember all apply to this surgery....in veterinary medicine, the clinical procedure serves as a model for testing the efficacy of analgesic drugs. Even though analgesic drugs can be used postoperatively, they rarely are, and their effects are incomplete and transient anyway, so sooner or later the pain will emerge."*

Surgical complications can include inadvertent removal of part of a pad, incomplete removal of the nail bed and partial regrowth of the nail, infection, and rare anesthetic complications.

Myth: New surgical procedures eliminate the harmful effects of declawing.

Reality: While more of the toe may be left intact, the cat is still handicapped for life, both physically and temperamentally.

Myth: Cats adapt well to being declawed.

Reality: Declawing can permanently hamper the sensations and enjoyment involved in walking, running, springing, climbing, and stretching. The nervous, defensive, attitudes of many declawed cats suggest there is a heightened awareness of their vulnerability. Stress in cats, as in humans, takes its toll in a variety of health and behavior problems.

Feline behavior counselors, humane workers, and cat owners who have the opportunity to observe clawed and declawed cats in their home environments have noted that often declawed cats exhibit one or more of the following problems:

- Peculiar litterbox preferences (smooth or soft surfaces) resulting in litterbox avoidance (not always immediately after the operation, but frequently occurring later in life).
- Unprovoked biting.
- Impaired balance and agility.
- Extreme timidity, especially when strangers or other animals are present.
- Lack of playful and vigorous activity in adulthood, resulting in obesity.

In her book, *250 Things You can Do to Make Your Cat Adore You*, Ingrid Newkirk states, "...declawed cats can suffer chronic back and joint pain as shoulder, leg, and back muscles weaken. No wonder cats suffering this way may bite when scratched or stroked too hard."



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Myth: Declawing is a well accepted procedure.

Reality: It's a controversial topic in the United States. It's not a hot topic in many other countries, such as England and Germany, because it's not an option--it's against the law. While the stated policy of the American Veterinary Medical Association implies that onychectomy should be a last resort and only performed "when the cat cannot be trained not to use its claws destructively," little is done in most (but thankfully, not all) clinics to inform cat owners about effective and proven alternatives. Following is a sampling of the many humane organizations that publicly oppose declawing: The American Humane Association; The Humane Society of the United States; Friends of Animals (national); The International Society of Animal Rights; and Tree House Animal Foundation.

Alternatives to Declawing

Scratching by cats is a normal behavior. It provides both scent and visual territorial marking, helps condition the claws by removing old layers of claw and exposing the sharp new claw underneath, and provides some stretching exercise.

Provide scratching posts. It's as easy to train a cat to scratch on a proper scratching post as it is to train a cat to use a litterbox, because it's instinctual! Just as the litterbox must meet some basic criteria to be acceptable to the cat, so the scratching post must meet some basic requirements. A cat-appealing post should be: 1) at least 30" tall, 2) made of soft wood or wrapped with sisal rope, and 3) mounted in a stable, untipable base. Cats prefer loosely woven material with a definite longitudinal weave or grain that allows them to dig their claws in and get a good, long stroke. However, commercial posts often are covered with tightly woven, durable materials such as carpet. To encourage your cat to use such a post, cover it with a securely fastened piece of upholstery. As your cat rips through the upholstery into the carpet, the carpet becomes rough and frayed and absorbs your cat's scent. Once the upholstery is thoroughly shredded, it may be discarded as long as your cat continues to use the carpeted post. Other posts use sisal, cardboard, wood, or wood composite surfaces. Unless it's destroyed, the post should not be replaced as it begins to wear; in fact, when it becomes stringy and easy to rip, it's most appealing to your cat!

To encourage the cat to use it, scratch on the post with your nails and call the cat over (cats are great imitators). Praise him profusely whenever he scratches on it. Try rubbing the post with catnip. Because cats tend to scratch and stretch after waking, put at least one post close to their sleeping area.

Keep the nails clipped. You can do this yourself (your veterinarian can give you hints and instructions) or have it done by a veterinarian or groomer. Cats can still do some limited damage with clipped nails.

Discourage use of your cat's favorite off-limits surface by covering the area with aluminum foil or double-sided tape. These surfaces don't have a texture that feels good to scratch. Since cats don't like citrus scents, use lemon-scented sprays or lemon and orange peels to make the former scratching sites less attractive. If your cat persists in scratching the furniture, try squirting her with a water gun or a spray bottle set on stream. Another option is a loud whistle or other noise-maker. You must employ these deterrents while she is scratching for them to be effective. The point is to establish an aversion to the spot you don't want her to scratch. Don't hit your cat. It will be ineffective and cruel.

Thanks to Cats International (www.catsinternational.org) for compiling the majority of this information.

