

## AAFP Position Statement

### Declawing

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) strongly believes it is the obligation of veterinarians to provide cat owners with alternatives to declawing (onychectomy). Declawing is an elective procedure that is highly controversial. If owners are considering declawing, they must be provided with complete education about feline declawing, including the anatomic details of what a declaw entails

(ie, amputation of the third phalanx [P3]) and the importance of proper pain management. In addition, alternatives to surgery and the risks and benefits of surgery need to be discussed.

It is important that owners understand that scratching is a normal feline behavior; it is both inherited and learned.<sup>1</sup> The primary reason for scratching is to maintain the necessary claw motion used in hunting

and climbing.<sup>2</sup> In addition, it is done to re-establish claw sharpness via 'husk' (or 'sheath') removal and to stretch the body. Finally, it is an important means of visual and olfactory communication. Scratching can be directed to areas that owners consider appropriate. Steps that should be taken to prevent destructive scratching and are alternatives to declawing are described in the box.

#### Veterinarians should counsel owners to do the following:

✦ **Provide suitable implements ('scratchers') for normal scratching behavior.** Examples are scratching posts or pads, cardboard boxes, and lumber (timber) or logs. Scratchers may be vertical or horizontal. They should be tall or long enough to allow full stretching and stable enough so they do not move or fall over. Scratching materials preferred by cats include wood, sisal rope, carpet, cardboard and rough fabric. In one study, carpet-covered vertical scratchers were preferred.<sup>3</sup> Owners may need to experiment with a variety of textures and types of scratchers to determine one or more that their cat prefers.<sup>4</sup>

Stringent attention must be given to both location and suitability, otherwise the cat may choose other areas/objects that are desirable to them, but not to the owner.<sup>5</sup> Because cats often stretch and scratch upon awakening, a scratcher should be placed next to where the cat sleeps. It may also be effective to place a scratcher near the cat's preferred, yet undesirable scratching object (eg, the corner of a couch). In addition, access to the 'undesired' object needs to be temporarily denied by removing or covering/protecting it with a material that is aversive to the cat (eg, double-sided sticky tape, loose fabric, foil or plastic).<sup>3</sup> Kittens and cats can be trained to use scratchers by enticing the

cat to the item with catnip, treats or toys, and by rewarding behavior near or on the scratcher. If the cat scratches elsewhere, the cat should be picked up gently and taken to the scratcher, and rewarded. Cats should be positively reinforced and never punished.<sup>6</sup>



✦ **Provide appropriate claw care by regularly trimming the claws** to prevent injury or damage to household items. Proper feline nail trimmers should be used to prevent splintering of the nails. Nail trimming frequency depends on the cat's lifestyle. Kittens, indoor-only and older cats will need more regular nail trims, whereas outdoor cats may naturally wear their nails and require less frequent trimming. Trim nails in a calm environment and provide positive reinforcement for the cat.<sup>6</sup>

✦ **Consider temporary synthetic nail caps**, which are available as an alternative to onychectomy (or surgical declawing). These caps are glued over the nails to help prevent human injury or damage to property. Nail caps usually need to be reapplied every 4–6 weeks.<sup>7</sup>

✦ **Consider using synthetic facial pheromone sprays and/or diffusers** to help relieve anxiety or stress.<sup>8</sup> Application of synthetic feline interdigital semiochemical (FIS) on the desired scratcher has been shown to induce scratching behavior on an appropriate target.<sup>2</sup> At the time of publication, FIS is available only in Europe; Feliway (Ceva) can be used instead in countries such as the US where FIS is not available. In addition, deterrent materials (eg, double-sided sticky tape, foil, plastic) may be placed on the undesired scratching object.

✦ **Provide appropriate feline environmental enrichment**, which must be implemented for successful behavioral modification.<sup>9</sup> Repetitive or increases in scratching behavior of indoor cats may be related to anxiety, stress, attention seeking, or lack of perceived security in their environment.<sup>2,5</sup> Anxiety can be exacerbated by owner punishment, thus driving the cat to increase scratching behavior in the same or other locations.<sup>5</sup>

The surgical alternative of deep digital flexor tendonectomy can cause deleterious results due to the overgrowth of nails, the need for more extensive claw care required of the owner, and the development of chronic discomfort in some patients. Consequently, deep digital flexor tendonectomy is not recommended.

Onychectomy is not a medically necessary procedure for the cat in

most instances. There are inherent risks and complications with this surgical procedure that increase with age.<sup>10</sup> These include, but are not limited to, the following: acute pain, hemorrhage, swelling, infection and nerve trauma.<sup>11</sup> Long-term complications include lameness, chronic draining tracts, retained P3 material leading to claw regrowth, development of palmigrade

stance, behavioral problems<sup>11</sup> and chronic neuropathic pain. Fewer than half of veterinary schools in the USA include a mandatory lecture or laboratory to teach this surgery. Lack of formal training in the procedure could lead to inferior surgical technique, thereby increasing the likelihood of both long- and short-term complications.<sup>10</sup>

## FELINE FOCUS

Regardless of the method used, onychectomy causes a significant level of pain. Patients may experience both adaptive and maladaptive pain. In addition to inflammatory pain, the cat may develop long-term neuropathic or central pain if its pain is inadequately managed during the perioperative and healing periods.

In human medicine, the reasons for phalanx amputation include 'tumors, malformations that affect function, infection, severe post-traumatic vascular damage or gangrene. Removal of the nail is done for ingrown toenail or paronychia' (A Hugo, 2014, personal communication). Similar medical conditions in a cat might indicate the need for a specific phalanx to be removed. This would not support the amputation of normal digits.<sup>10,12</sup>

While it has been suggested that onychectomy is acceptable to prevent spread of zoonotic disease(s) to immune-compromised people,<sup>10</sup> current research demonstrates the greater value of proper hygiene and parasite control in the prevention of most common zoonoses. In households where cats come into contact with immune-compromised individuals, extensive education about zoonotic disease potential should be discussed and documented in the medical record. Of note, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not advise declawing cats owned by HIV-infected persons; rather, these individuals 'should avoid rough play with cats and situations in which scratches are likely.'<sup>13</sup>

Because property destruction and human injury occur less commonly from the claws on the rear feet, four-paw declaws are not recommended.

There is no current peer-reviewed data definitively proving that cats with destructive behavior are more likely to be euthanized, abandoned or relinquished. The decision of whether or not to declaw should not be impacted by these considerations.

If surgical onychectomy is performed, the appropriate use of safe and effective anesthetic agents and perioperative analgesic medications is imperative. The AAFP believes that a multimodal pain management strategy of sufficient dose (potency) and duration is required for feline onychectomy. Such a protocol will lead to reduced patient stress, less pain, and reduced patient morbidity and mortality.<sup>14,15</sup> Because one of their primary

means of defense has been removed, declawed cats should be housed indoors and properly supervised for their protection when outside.

The AAFP reviews scientific data and supports controlled scientific studies that provide insight into all aspects of feline medicine. The AAFP recognizes that feline onychectomy is an ethically controversial procedure. It has been considered for prohibition in some US states and cities and Canadian provinces. It is currently prohibited in the European Union (including the United Kingdom),<sup>16</sup> Australia, Brazil, Israel and some other countries, as well as several cities in California.

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This Position Statement is an update on the AAFP's earlier Position Statement on declawing, dated November 2007.

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