

Facts About Declawing

By Dr. Jean Hofve, DVM

There are many myths, misunderstandings, and misinformation concerning declawing. If you are considering having your cat declawed, or if your veterinarian has suggested it, please take a few minutes to learn about this major surgical procedure before you make a decision.

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. A cat's natural instinct to scratch serves both physical and psychological needs. Before domestication, cats satisfied these needs by clawing tree trunks. 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 is the amputation of each front toe bone at the first joint (hind foot declaw surgery is not commonly performed). This is equivalent to a person 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.

What are the potential complications of declawing?

Pain. While the immediate post-surgical pain that the cats suffer is obviously severe, it is impossible to know how much chronic pain and suffering declawing causes. 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.

Post-surgical complications. Lameness, abscesses, and regrowth of the claw can occur after surgery. In one report that studied cats for only five months after surgery, more than 30% of cats developed complications from both declaw and tenectomy surgeries (digital tenectomy or tendonectomy is a procedure, sometimes promoted as an “alternative” to declaw, where the tendons that extend the toes are cut. The claws still require frequent trimming. The procedure is not recommended.). Nail regrowth has been known to occur up to 15 years after surgery; and the process of regrowth is painful as it occurs.

Joint Stiffness. In declawed (and tenectomized) 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. Researchers have shown that, in the immediate post-operative period, newly declawed cats shift their body weight backward onto the large central pad of the front feet and off the toes. This effect was significant even when strong pain medication was given, and remained apparent for the duration of the study (up to 40 hours after surgery). If this altered gait persists over time, it would cause stress on the leg joints and spine, and could lead to damage and arthritic changes in multiple joints.

Litterbox problems. Many experts say that declawed cats have more litter box avoidance problems than clawed cats. If cat owners knew they could end up trading scratched furniture for urine-soaked carpeting, they might have second thoughts about declawing. Studies suggest that up to 15% of cats will develop litterbox avoidance behaviors after declawing.

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. Declawing that results in biting or litterbox avoidance may result in the cat being dumped at a shelter. Such behaviors make them unadoptable, and they will be destroyed. 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. It’s a horrible truth that today, a friendly, declawed cat makes ideal bait for training fighting dogs to kill.

How can I stop unwanted scratching behavior without declawing?

Despite their reputation for independence, cats can readily be trained to use a scratching post instead of the sofa, curtains, or rugs. Using surgery to prevent or correct a behavioral problem is expedient, but it is not the wisest, kindest, or best solution for your cat. Cats can be trained not to

scratch furniture or other objects. Amazingly, many people do not even know that they should provide a scratching post for their cats. Because scratching is a deeply ingrained instinct in cats, if there is no appropriate spot, they will be forced to substitute furniture or other objects.

A vertical scratching post should be at least 28-36" high to allow the cat to stretch to his full height. Many cats prefer natural soft wood, such as an aspen log, cedar or redwood plank, or 4×4 posts wound with sisal rope. Some cats prefer a horizontal surface; inexpensive cardboard scratchers are popular with these cats. Rubbing the surface with catnip, or using a catnip spray, may enhance the attractiveness of the post. Other scratching solutions include:

- Training (yes, cats CAN be trained!)
- Regular claw-trimming
- Rotary sanders (Peticure, Dremel)
- Nail caps (SoftPaws, Soft Claws)
- Emery scratching boards (Emerycat)
- Double-sided sticky tape (Sticky Paws)
- Non-stick furniture protectors (Corner Savers, Fresh Kitty Furniture Protectors)
- Pet repellent sprays
- Access restriction (upside-down vinyl rug runner)
- Remote aversive devices (ScatMat, Ssscat)
- Phermones (Feliway)
- Furniture covers (blankets, towels—anything loose will not be appealing to your cat!)

Is LASER declawing okay?

Laser declawing causes less bleeding and swelling than other techniques. This reduces pain and complications in the first few days after surgery, but the long-term implications of the procedure remain the same.

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.



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