

Declawing Cats: More than Just a Manicure

The Humane Society of the United States



Declawing is a topic that arouses strong feelings. Some people believe it's cruel and unnecessary, while others think it has its place.

Why people declaw cats

People choose to declaw their cats for a number of reasons. Some are frustrated with shredded drapes or furniture, others simply feel that a declawed cat is easier to live with, and some people—especially those with immunodeficiencies, bleeding disorders, or

children—are worried about being scratched. Declawing is not recommended by infectious disease specialists. The risk from scratches for these people are less than those from bites, cat litter, or fleas carried by their cats.

Cats are usually about 8 weeks old when they begin scratching things. It's the ideal time to train kittens to use a scratching post and allow nail trims. However, because many people plan to have their cats declawed when they're spayed or neutered, they don't provide these options and their cats naturally scratch items of value. To accommodate their clients, many vets offer special pricing on neuter/declaw packages which saves their clients money and avoids the cat needing to go under anesthesia twice.

Yet declawing is almost never necessary, and owners should not consider it a routine prevention for destructive scratching. Declawing can actually lead to an entirely different set of behavior problems that may be worse than shredding the couch.

What is declawing?

Too often, people think that declawing is a simple surgery that removes a cat's nails—the equivalent of having your fingernails trimmed. Sadly, this is far from the truth.

Declawing traditionally involves the amputation of the last bone of each toe. If performed on a human being, it would be like cutting off each finger at the last knuckle.

How is a cat declawed?

The standard method of declawing is amputating with a scalpel or guillotine clipper. The wounds are closed with stitches or surgical glue, and the feet are bandaged.

Another method is laser surgery, in which a small, intense beam of light cuts through tissue by heating and vaporizing it. However, it's still the amputation of the last toe bone of the cat and carries with it the same long-term risks of lameness and behavioral problems as does declawing with scalpels or clippers.

A third procedure is the tendonectomy, in which the tendon that controls the claw in each toe is severed. The cat keeps his claws, but can't control them or extend them to scratch. This procedure is

associated with a high incidence of abnormally thick claw growth. Therefore, more frequent and challenging nail trims are required to prevent the cat's claws from snagging on people, carpet, furniture, and drapes, or growing into the pads.

Because of its complications, tendonectomy may lead to declawing anyway. Although it's not actually amputation, and thus considered more humane by some, a 1998 study published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association found the incidence of bleeding, lameness and infection was similar for both techniques.

After effects

Medical drawbacks to declawing include pain, infection and tissue necrosis (tissue death), lameness, and back pain. Removing claws changes the way a cat's foot meets the ground and can cause pain similar to wearing an uncomfortable pair of shoes. There can also be a regrowth of improperly removed claws, nerve damage, and bone spurs.

After a cat is declawed, she can experience litter box problems. Scratching in the litter box after surgery could be painful, leading the cat to associate the box with pain and avoid it. Some cats may become biters because they no longer have their claws for defense.

What you can do

Scratching is normal cat behavior. It isn't done to destroy a favorite chair or get even. The Humane Society United States opposes declawing as a way to prevent destructive scratching. Many other countries feel so strongly about the issue that they have banned the procedure. But you don't have to let your cat destroy your house.

Keep his claws trimmed to minimize damage to household items. Get a scratching post and train him to use it. Purchasing or building a scratching post is an important step in training a cat to avoid destructive scratching.

Glue soft plastic caps (such as Soft Paws) on his nails. They do need to be replaced about every six weeks. Ask your vet for information. Use a special tape (such as Sticky Paws) to deter your cat from destructive scratching.

Unnecessary procedures

Declawing and tendonectomies should be reserved only for those rare cases in which a cat has a medical problem that would warrant such surgery, such as the need to remove cancerous nail bed tumors. Declawing does not guarantee that a cat will not be taken to a shelter if other problem behaviors occur, such as biting or not using the litter box.

Although there have been improvements in the way that cats are declawed and better pain medications are available and used, it's still true that for the vast majority of cats, declawing is unnecessary. Educated pet parents can easily train their cats to use their claws in a manner that allows everyone to live together happily.



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