

Declawing Cats: Manicure or Mutilation?

Cats' claws and the bones and cartilage that hold them in place allow cats to balance properly, climb, and defend themselves, among other functions. Declawing, which removes these claws, bones, and cartilage, is a painful and permanently crippling procedure that should never be performed. There are effective and humane alternatives to declawing that can prevent cats from inflicting damage with their claws.

Why Do Cats Claw Objects?

Cats claw to have fun and exercise, to maintain the condition of their nails, and to mark their territory—visually and with scent. They stretch by digging their claws in and pulling against their own claw-hold. Cats' natural instinct to scratch serves both their physical and psychological needs. Before domestication, cats satisfied these needs by clawing tree trunks. Today, domesticated cats can be guided to satisfy their desire to claw without damaging valuable property.

Understanding Declawing

Declawing involves 10 separate, painful amputations. It is a serious surgery, not just a manicure. Declawing a cat involves general anesthesia and amputation of the last joint of each toe, including the bones, not just the nail.(1) The following are possible complications of this surgery:

- Adverse reaction to anesthetic
- Gangrene, which can lead to limb amputation
- Hemorrhaging
- Permanent nerve damage
- Persistent pain
- Reluctance to walk
- Scar tissue formation
- Sequestrum (bone chips), requiring additional surgery(2)
- Skin disorders

After surgery, the nails may grow back inside the paw, causing pain but remaining invisible to observers. Declawing results in a gradual weakening of leg, shoulder, and back muscles, and because of impaired balance caused by the procedure, declawed cats have to relearn to walk, much as a person would after losing his or her toes.

Lasting Difficulties

Without claws, even house-trained cats may urinate and defecate outside the litterbox in an attempt to mark their territory. Declawed cats may be morose, reclusive, and withdrawn or irritable, aggressive, and unpredictable. Many people think that declawed cats are safer around babies, but in fact, the lack of claws, a cat's first line of defense, makes many cats feel so insecure that they tend to bite more often as a means of self-protection.(3) A study published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA)* reported that of those observed, 33 percent of declawed cats developed at least one behavioral problem and 80 percent had more than one medical complication.(4) Declawed cats are also more likely to be surrendered to shelters.(5)

Banned by Countries and Cities and Condemned by Vets

Nearly two dozen countries—including England, Australia, and Japan—ban or severely restrict declawing surgeries.(6) Catalonia, Spain, prohibits declawing under its Law of Animal Protection.(7) A declawing ban was passed in West Hollywood, California, where one City Council official explained, "As guardians of animals, we have a relationship of respect, that the animal not be amputated or subjected to techniques that create harm."(8) Following a lawsuit against the city filed by the California Veterinary Medical Association—which argued that West Hollywood had infringed on veterinarians' professional rights—a court struck down the ordinance. Nonetheless, on the heels of that precedent-setting legislation, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution "condemning" declawing and urging veterinarians to drop the procedure.(9)

Many vets refuse to perform the surgery. Dr. Jennifer Conrad wrote in JAVMA that "[r]outine declawing (unlike sterilization) is never performed for the sake of the animal" and that as a veterinarian, she has "an obligation to do what is best for the animals and not what is most convenient for their owners."(10) Dr. Melinda Merck does not perform declawing surgeries at her Georgia clinic, saying the process "is an amputation ... and it's awful."(11) The Cat Practice in New York City tells its clients, "If you love your cat ... don't declaw!"(12)

Compassionate Alternatives

With a little effort and patience, you can protect your furnishings and preserve your cat's claws at the same time. The following hints will help:

- Trim your cat's nails regularly. When the cat is relaxed and unafraid, gently press on the toes until the claws

extend. Use a pair of nail clippers and cut only the tip of the nail, taking care not to damage the vein or “quick.” The nail hook is what tears upholstery, so removing it virtually eliminates damage.

- Buy or build two or more scratching posts. They must be sturdy, tall enough to allow the cat to stretch (3 feet or taller), and properly placed. Bark-covered logs, posts covered with sisal, or posts covered with tightly woven burlap work well. Soft, fluffy, carpeted scratching posts don’t work—they are one of the greatest causes of declawing because cats don’t like the posts, and frustrated human companions resort to surgery. If you use carpet, secure it to the posts with the rough backing on the outside; soft carpeting will not satisfy a cat’s need to claw. Place one scratching post where your cat is already clawing and another near the area where he or she normally sleeps (cats like to stretch and scratch when they first wake up). An excellent scratching post is available from [Felix Katnip Tree Company](#), 3623 Fremont Ave. N., Seattle, WA 98103; 206-547-0042.
- Consider cardboard or sisal “scratching boxes” that lie flat on the floor. These are inexpensive and small enough to scatter around the house, allowing your cat easy access to an “approved” scratching spot at all times. They do wear out fairly quickly, however, and will need to be replaced every few months—otherwise, cats may get frustrated and revert to using furniture.
- Teach your cat where to claw and where not to claw. Place your cat on the new scratching post and move his or her paws, or pretend to scratch it yourself. This will scent the posts and encourage exploratory clawing. Make the post a “fun” place to be. Play games with your cat on and around the post, and attach hanging strings, balls, and/or bouncy wire toys to it. Try sprinkling catnip on the post, too. (A once-a-week or so refresher application will keep your cat interested.) When kitty uses the post, reinforce this behavior with praise, but be careful not to startle or frighten him or her. When your cat claws furniture, discourage this behavior with a firm voice or other loud noise, but never with physical force. Directing lukewarm water from a squirt gun at the animal’s back is often successful. During the training period, you may need to cover upholstery with plastic or other protection (cats don’t like the slippery feel and will quickly learn to stay away).
- Strategically placed double-sided tape, such as Paws Off (available at [PETACatalog.org](#)), also discourages the clawing of furniture and upholstery.

What You Can Do

If your friends or family members are considering having their cats declawed, let them know about the danger and cruelty of this serious and unnecessary surgery. Support legislation to ban declawing in your community.

References

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- (4) S.C. Yeon *et al.*, “Attitudes of Owners Regarding Tendonectomy and Onychectomy in Cats,” *The Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 218 (2001): 43-7.
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- (9) Simone Sebastian, “Supervisors Condemn Removal of Cat Claws,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 Sep. 2003.
- (10) Jennifer Conrad, D.V.M., letter, *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 223 (2003): 40-1.
- (11) Bob Keefe, “California City Considers Ban on Declawing Cats,” *Palm Beach Post*, 2 Feb. 2003.
- (12) The Cat Practice, “[If You Love Your Cat ...](#)” *Feline Health*, last accessed 4 Aug. 2004.