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Declawing: A Rational Look

By Jean Hofve, DVM

There are few feline issues that are as controversial as declawing. There is a great deal of myth and misinformation out there about it. If you are considering having this surgery performed on your cat, or if a veterinarian has suggested it, please read this article first to learn more about this major surgical procedure. Isn't it worth a few minutes of your time to make sure that you make a rational and informed decision?

Declawing is not a simple or routine surgery. It should never be done as a "preventative," especially in kittens. Despite their reputation for independence, cats can readily be trained to leave the sofa, curtains, or carpet untouched. Using surgery to prevent or correct a behavioral problem is expedient, but it is definitely not the smartest, kindest, most cost-effective, or best solution for you and your cat. 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 serious physical and behavioral complications, both short- and long-term.

Why do people declaw their cats?

- To protect furniture or other property
- They don't want to try to train the cat
- They tried one or two things to train the cat but it didn't work
- Their other cat is declawed and they want to "level the playing field"
- To stop the cat from scratching them
- Their friend's or family's cat is declawed
- They have always had declawed cats
- Their veterinarian recommends it
- Because they just do not know any better

Many people report that they are happier with their cats after declawing, because it makes the cats "better pets." Unfortunately, just as many people have discovered--too late--that declawing frequently leads to far worse problems than it solves. There is no way to know ahead of time into which category your cat might fall! There are other, better ways to solve behavior problems than radical and irreversible surgery.

What is declawing?

Declawing, which is rightly described as "de-toeing" when the same procedure is done to chickens, is the amputation of each front toe at the first joint (hind foot declaws are not commonly done but would be equivalent). This is necessary because, unlike a fingernail, the claw actually grows from the first toe bone. The procedure is so excruciatingly painful that it was once used as a technique of torture, and even today it remains the primary test of the effectiveness of pain medications. Physical recovery takes a few weeks, but even after the surgical wounds have healed, there are other long-term physical and psychological effects.

For the surgery itself, the cat is put under general anesthesia and the toes are prepared with antiseptic soap. A tourniquet is placed on the cat's leg and tightened to prevent excessive bleeding. Using a scalpel, the surgeon grips the tip of the claw with a small clamp, and uses scalpel to carve around the third phalanx, cutting through the skin and severing tendons, nerves,

and blood vessels. In another technique using a guillotine blade (Resco), a sterilized veterinary nail clipper is used to cut the tissues (below left; the full series of photos can be seen at lisaviolet.com). A scalpel may be used to remove the last piece of bone. The wound is typically closed with sutures or surgical glue, but some vets rely on bandages to control the bleeding. Tight bandages restrict the normal response of the tissue to swell, causing intense pressure and pain. LASER surgery is similar to the scalpel technique, although the LASER cauterizes the blood vessels by burning them as they are cut, so there is less bleeding (below right).



Are claws so important to a cat's well-being?

Claws perform a number of vital functions for the cat. By scratching various surfaces, cats create a visual and scent identification mark for their territory. Claws provide psychological comfort through kneading, help the cat climb to safety or a secure vantage point, and help the cat fully stretch his back and legs. A declawed cat never again experiences the head-to-toe satisfaction of a full body stretch!

What are the potential complications of declawing?

Post-surgical complications: Abscesses and claw regrowth can occur a few weeks to many years after surgery. Chronic or intermittent lameness may develop. In one study that followed cats for only 5 months after surgery, nearly 1/3 of cats developed complications from both declaw and tendonectomy surgeries (digital tendonectomy is a procedure whereby the tendons that extend the toes are cut; it's sometimes promoted as an "alternative" to declawing. However, because these cats require constant maintenance and frequent nail clipping to prevent injury, most are eventually declawed anyway). Biting and urinating outside the litterbox are the most common behavior problems reported, occurring in over 30% of cats.

Pain: It is impossible to know how much chronic pain and suffering declawing causes, because cats are unable to express these in human terms. However, we can compare similar procedures in people. Virtually all human amputees report "phantom" sensations from the amputated part, ranging from merely strange to extremely painful (about 40% of such sensations are categorized as painful). Because declawing involves at least ten separate amputations, it is virtually certain that all declawed cats experience phantom pain in one or more toes. In humans, these sensations continue for life, even when the amputation took place in early childhood. There is no physiological reason that this would not be true for cats; their nervous systems are identical to ours. Cats are stoic creatures, and typically conceal pain or illness until it becomes overwhelming. With chronic pain, they simply learn to cope with it. Their behavior may appear "normal," but a lack of overt signs of pain does *not* mean that they are pain-free.

Joint Stiffness: In declawed (and tendonectomized) cats, the tendons that control the toe joints retract after surgery, and these joints become essentially "frozen." The toes remain fully contracted for the life of the cat. In cats who were declawed many years ago, the toe joints are

often so arthritic that they cannot be moved, even under deep anesthesia. The fact that most cats continue to make scratching motions after they are declawed is often said to "prove" that they do not "miss" their claws. However, this behavior is equally well--and more realistically--explained as desperate but ineffective efforts to stretch those stiff toes, legs, shoulders and backs.

Arthritis: Research has shown that, in the immediate post-operative period, newly declawed cats shift their body weight backward onto the large central pads of the feet, and off the sore 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 the surgery). If this altered gait persists over time, it would cause stress on the leg joints and spine, and lead to damage and arthritic changes in multiple joints. One large study showed that arthritis of the elbow is very common in older cats. When contacted, the researchers admitted that they did not ask or record whether the cats were declawed, perhaps preferring the "don't ask, don't tell" policy so as not to anger those many veterinarians who make a lot of money from declawing.

Litterbox Problems: Experts say that declawed cats have more litterbox problems than clawed cats, and the statistics prove it. Not many people would choose urine-soaked carpeting (or floorboards, sofa cushions, walls, bedding, or mattresses) over a few scratch marks, but this is a distressingly common outcome. In one survey, 95% of calls about declawed cats related to litterbox problems, while only 46% of clawed cats had such problems - and most of those were older cats with physical ailments that accounted for the behavior. Some households with declawed cats have spent thousands of dollars replacing drywall, carpets, and subfloors to repair urine damage.

Biting: Some experts believe that cats who are declawed are likely to become biters. Many declawed cats do seem to "notice" that their claws are missing, and turn to biting as a primary means of defense--not a good choice for a cat in a home with children or immunocompromised individuals.

Change in Personality: This is a common complaint: "my cat has never been the same." A friendly, delightful kitten may become a morose, fearful, or reclusive cat, never to recover its natural joy, grace, and love of exploration.

Neglect, Abandonment, and Abuse: Declawing that results in biting or inappropriate elimination outside the litterbox may result in the cat being permanently locked in the basement, dumped at a shelter, or simply abandoned. Many cats are exiled to a life outdoors because of these unwanted behaviors. There, they also risk injury or death by dogs, cars, wild predators, disease, poison, and other [hazards of outdoor life](#); even more so than clawed cats who retain their primary defenses. People who work with feral cat Trap-Neuter-Release programs often find declawed cats in their traps--cats who should never have been outside at all. These cats once had homes, but were abandoned in an alley or field--almost certainly due to behavior problems resulting from declaw surgery. The claim by veterinarians that "declawing keeps cats in their homes" clearly isn't true for these declawed cats who lost their homes and were abandoned to an uncertain fate. There is no way to know how many cats are dumped this way, but based on experiences in Denver, a typical urban environment, the number is likely in the many thousands.

Death: There is always a small but real risk of death from any general anesthesia, as well as from bleeding or other surgical complications. If a declawed cat that develops a behavior problem is taken to a shelter, such behavior makes him unadoptable, and he will promptly be euthanized (killed). For exiled cats, it is unfortunately common for outdoor cats to be stolen and used as defenseless live bait to be torn apart by fighting dogs being "blood-trained," or sold to laboratories or biological suppliers. It's an ugly reality that a tame, friendly, declawed cat makes an ideal experimental subject.

What about LASER declawing--isn't that better?

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

Why do so many veterinarians suggest declawing cats?

Many veterinarians in the U.S. have become accustomed to performing the declawing procedure without thinking about--or even recognizing--the common complications. Some even recommend declawing kittens at the same time they are spayed or neutered, whether or not they have developed destructive scratching habits. However, this goes against the express written policy of the American Veterinary Medical Association. All the top veterinary behaviorists agree that declawing should not even be considered until all other options, including training and deterrents, have been sincerely tried and failed. Veterinarians who, for example, declaw young kittens are violating this AVMA policy. Several telephone surveys have found that every single veterinary clinic contacted was willing to declaw a cat without providing--or even offering--behavior counseling or alternatives to the surgery. They did not ask whether training or alternatives had been tried. They didn't even ask if the cat had a scratching post. These clinics are in direct violation of AVMA policy.

Who says declawing is a bad idea?

Declawing is illegal or considered extremely inhumane in 25 countries around the world, including most "civilized" nations: England, Scotland, Wales, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Slovenia, Portugal, Belgium, Spain, Brazil, Israel, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Yugoslavia.

Since animal shelters and humane societies are prime dumping grounds for cats with behavior problems, shelter workers and volunteers have a realistic and practical view about whether declawing keeps cats in their homes, or creates worse difficulties. A survey of major shelters and humane societies around the U.S. found many who are firmly against declawing, and some will not even adopt a cat to a person who intends to declaw. Against declawing are the ASPCA, Humane Society of the United States, Massachusetts SPCA, Denver Dumb Friends League, San Francisco SPCA, SPCA of Texas, and the Animal Welfare League (the Midwest's largest humane society, located in Chicago). The SPCA of Los Angeles puts it in no uncertain terms: "We do NOT support, nor condone, the act of declawing cats. It is cruel, unnecessary, and inhumane." The Cat Fancier's Association, the world's largest pedigreed cat registry, opposes declawing as "without benefit to the cat" and involving "post operative discomfort or pain, and potential future behavioral or physical effects."

In 2006, the USDA--normally an extremely conservative federal agency--amended the Animal Welfare Act to prohibit declawing of exotic carnivores, saying that it "can cause considerable pain and discomfort to the animal and may result in chronic health problems." In 2007, after much legal wrangling, the California Supreme Court upheld a ban on declawing enacted by the city of West Hollywood, CA, in 2003.

How can I stop unwanted scratching behavior without declawing?

Provide an appropriate place to scratch:

Cats of any age can be trained not to scratch furniture or other objects--including people--although it is easier if the cat is trained as a kitten. Amazingly, many people do not even know that they should provide a scratching post for their cats; nor do they realize that in many cases, they have to train the cat to use it. Because scratching is such a deeply ingrained instinct in cats, if there is no appropriate spot, they will be forced to substitute furniture or other objects.

To decide on a strategy, watch where your kitten or cat likes to scratch. Does she go for a long belly-stretch on the carpet, or does she prefer vertical surfaces like the arm of the sofa or the back of a chair? Try to imitate her favorite spots with acceptable scratching options.

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 a section of bark-covered log or a cedar or redwood plank, or posts covered with sisal rope, which is more popular with cats than the carpeted surfaces of many posts. The post must be very sturdy and stable; if it wobbles, your cat is unlikely to use it. Rubbing the surface with catnip, or using a catnip concentrate spray, may enhance the attractiveness of the post. For the more adventurous types, there are cat trees in dozens of sizes and colors, with features such as hidey-holes, lounging platforms, dangling toys, and other creative amenities. Like to do it yourself? There are plans for easy-to-make posts on the [Internet](#) or in many cat books. Don't be too quick to discard a shabby, well-worn post--that's when it's the most attractive to your cat!

No space for a cat tree? There are many other options available, such as clear sticky strips to apply to the furniture, and other deterrents, as well as a multitude of smaller cat-attractive scratching posts, mats, and other distractions that will protect your possessions. Many cats prefer to scratch on rugs or other horizontal surfaces; inexpensive cardboard scratchers are popular with these cats. Be sure to replace these periodically so they provide adequate resistance to the claws.

With scratching posts, as in real estate, think "location, location, location." Start with the post near kitty's favorite scratching object, and gradually (by inches) move it to its final destination.

See our article on "[Cats and Claws--Living Happily Ever After](#)" for more details and ideas.

Make the *unacceptable* object *undesirable*:

This may be as simple as throwing on a slip cover, or draping a thick towel, fleece, or blanket over the arm of the sofa. What kitty likes about upholstery fabric is its resistance--this is what allows him to get the grip needed to stretch. If he hooks his claws into material that gives, or immediately pulls off and falls on his head, he'll lose interest in no time.

Another simple (and perhaps more esthetically pleasing) plan is to use double-sided tape, such as [Sticky Paws](#). This product has a special adhesive that does not damage the furniture, but feels disgusting to the cat's sensitive paw pads. It may need to be replaced every month or so as dust and hair accumulate on the tape's surface, but for many cats one or two applications is enough to dissuade them permanently.

[Purrfect Paw](#) is a clear plastic protector for the corners of furniture without the stickiness of other products. A similar product is "Sofa Savers". Call for information at 972-790-6658.

Padding for the Paws:

For aggressive or unremitting scratching, replaceable soft plastic caps for the claws called "[Soft Paws](#)" are a good solution. These caps are glued onto the nail; they'll come off by themselves

after a few weeks and need replacing. They come in fun colors (as well as clear) and really do the trick. While you'll probably want your vet or groomer to apply them the first time, it's not that hard to replace them at home [[instructions](#)].

It's best to never play or roughhouse with your kitten or cat using your bare hands (or even covered-up hands!). You definitely don't want her to get the idea that biting or scratching human skin or body parts is okay. And while it's fun to watch the kitten attack your wiggling toes under a blanket, when he's 15 pounds with razor-sharp, inch-long fangs, it's not nearly as amusing. Serious aggression problems require assistance from your veterinarian, or your friendly behavior consultants at [Little Big Cat!](#)

Of course, conscientious nail-trimming [[instructions](#)] will keep the claws blunt and minimize the damage that kitty can do to fabrics, furniture, and fingers.

Last but not least

We know that there are a few individuals who will always declaw their cats. Their own personal convenience and the safety of their belongings is their top priority, and whether or not it causes suffering to the cat is not a significant concern. (Whether they should have a cat at all is a debate for another time!)

If you have a declawed cat, it is not too late to undo at least some of the damage. SpiritEssence offers "[Declaw Remedy](#)" to help heal both the physical and psychological trauma that occur with declaw surgery.

Fortunately, most people truly love their feline companions and want to do what's best for all concerned. If you are one of these wonderful people (and if you've read this far, we're pretty sure you are!), please think carefully about this beautiful little animal who trusts you and relies on you for her very existence. Please make the humane choice - and DO NOT DECLAW!