



To Declaw or Not... A Serious Decision

Although it has become common practice in the United States, declawing is not *a* routine surgery; it is ten surgeries. Since all operations have inherent risks, it is important to know the facts before making your decision. This is not intended to be all-inclusive, but will provide you some basic facts — facts that will help you to ask the right questions and make an informed decision.

Why Cats Scratch

With or without claws, cats scratch many times a day — to release stress, affirm territory, and exercise muscles. When cats scratch, the scent glands in the paws “mark” their territory. Declawed cats are able to leave their scent, but miss out on the stretching and exercise for their shoulder and back muscles. Over time, without the resistance claws offer when scratching, these muscles can weaken. Be aware that declawing is no guarantee against furniture damage. Cats will return to a favorite spot to scratch. Claws or no, eventually the fabric on the side or corner of that “favorite chair” becomes threadbare.



What is Declawing?

Declawing is the amputation of each front toe at the first joint. This is equivalent to a human losing the entire tip of every finger at the first knuckle. The ten operations can be performed by using one of three methods: guillotine-type nail shears, scalpel blades, or laser surgery. All of these methods can lead to post-surgery complications, which include hemorrhage, loss of the digital pad, infection, regrowth of claws, incomplete healing and exposure of the bone, neurapraxia from improper bandage placement, and lameness. Of the cats undergoing declaw surgery with the shears, 82.5% experience complications and 51.5% who were declawed with the scalpel experienced complications. Should you choose to declaw, laser surgery is the better alternative. It causes less bleeding and swelling than other techniques, which reduces the pain and complications, but the long-term implications remain the same. For more information see www.declawing.com.



The Pain

In veterinary medicine, declawing serves as a model of severe pain for testing the effectiveness of pain medications, according to Dr. Nicholas Dodman, a veterinarian, director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, and an author of several books on animal behavior. Dr. Dodman tells us the “inhumanity of the procedure is clearly demonstrated by the nature of cats’ recovery from anesthesia following the surgery. Unlike routine recoveries, including recovery from neutering surgeries, which are fairly peaceful, declawing surgery results in cats bouncing off the walls of the recovery cage because of excruciating pain. Cats that are stoic huddle in the corner of the recovery cage, immobilized in a state of helplessness with the overwhelming pain.”

Amputating the end of the paw modifies the cat’s stance, drastically altering the conformation of their feet. This causes the feet to meet the ground at an unnatural angle, which, in turn, can cause back pain. . . similar to what a human experiences when wearing improper or ill-fitting shoes. Being forced to walk unnaturally can put a strain on the paws and cause long-term pain. The pain may build up gradually and may be aggravated if the cat is overweight. Shortened paws may also cause pain in other parts of the cat’s body.

What to expect after surgery

- 🐾 Typically animals spend two nights in the hospital.
- 🐾 You can expect to see some bloody spotting from the toes during the first few days at home
- 🐾 You will need to replace your usual litter with shredded paper. Frequent changes (2-3 times a day) are recommended for 10 days after surgery.
- 🐾 Most animals will require pain medication.
- 🐾 Occasionally, not enough of the third bone is removed and the claw regrows.
- 🐾 When this occurs, infection is generally inevitable and the remaining bone must be removed.
- 🐾 You may also see behavior problems such as shyness, biting, and refusing to use the litter box.



Claw management strategies

Scratching Posts — A good vertical scratching post needs to be at least 32" tall and 4" diameter. It should have a sturdy base that won't tip easily. Wrap it with sisal rope. For horizontal scratching surfaces, various cardboard scratchers are available commercially, some built into toys. Location is important, too. Cats enjoy scratching upon waking from a nap. Be sure the post is close to their favorite napping spot. We carry good posts at our center in Verona, Wisconsin.

Clipping — Snipping the last ¼" or so from the nail removes the pointed tip and minimizes damage scratching may do. Clipping is easy. We can show you or clip for you at our center.

SoftPaws® — SoftPaws are vinyl nail covers that fit over your cat's claws. They last about 4 - 6 weeks and replacing them is easy. For more information, check out www.softpaws.com

Praise and Deterrents — Cats do respond to praise. When the cat scratches on the appropriate object, reward them. When they scratch in an inappropriate place, redirect them to appropriate scratching surface. For some cats, deterrents may be necessary. Not all deterrents work on every cat. Some commonly used ones are squirt guns (not in the face), Sticky Paws or wide double-sided tape strips, clapping hands, and "pennies in a soda can." When using deterrents, it is important that the cat associates them with the scratching and not with you.



Banned Procedure

Declawing is either illegal or considered an extremely inhumane procedure and restricted in Japan, England, Scotland, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales, Australia, New Zealand Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Portugal, and Brazil.

Other resources

www.catsinternational.com

www.maxshouse.com

www.de-clawing.com

www.cats.about.com

How can I contact Angel's Wish?

Cats will sometimes scratch what they shouldn't. They do make decisions; they do make mistakes. Part of being a responsible caretaker is providing the necessary tools to allow your cat to enjoy scratching without being destructive, another part is being tolerant of innate, natural behavior. For more information about claw management, please contact us. We will be glad to work with you.

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