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Cat Behavior Problems – Scratching Behavior and Declawing

What is Declawing?

Declawing is the surgical removal of the toenail and the portion of bone from which it grows. In most cases, only the front paws are declawed. Depending on how the procedure is performed, it might best be referred to as an amputation of the small bone on the end of each toe. As a surgical procedure, it requires a general anesthesia and appropriate and sufficient pain management throughout the recovery procedure. It generally takes a few days to a few weeks for healing to be completed, after which time the cat can walk, climb, knead and scratch comfortably. Anecdotally, adult cats and those that are heavier may take longer to heal and adapt.



Your cat may be hospitalized for several days after the surgery, and

pain management medications may be dispensed for the first few days that your cat returns home. In many cases, a special, dust-free kitty litter may be recommended to prevent contamination of the surgery sites until the paws are entirely healed.

Should I get my indoor cat declawed?

Declawing is a surgical procedure that may be painful and may affect the cat's mobility during the postoperative recovery period; it should not be considered a routine or preventive surgery. Declawing a cat merely because it will be staying indoors or because it might one day cause damage with its claws is difficult, if not impossible, to justify.

To decrease the need for multiple anesthetics, declawing is often performed at the time of surgical sterilization. Many cats are spayed or neutered at approximately 6 months of age. This gives you time to teach your cat where to scratch and how to use its claws appropriately. If you add in some partial confinement or a few strategically placed booby traps, most cats can be prevented from doing damage while learning what is acceptable to you. Regular nail trimming and commercially available plastic nail caps can also be useful to minimize damage to furniture.

In some cases, scratching is a form of marking behavior that might be due to anxiety. In these cases, declawing might stop the scratching and damage, but does not address the problem. Finding out what's wrong and resolving the anxiety might eliminate the scratching behavior.

In most cases understanding why a cat scratches and developing strategies for encouraging appropriate scratching and resolving inappropriate scratching will effectively remove any need to declaw. Note that in some jurisdictions and a number of countries declawing is considered inhumane and has been banned.

My cat is causing unacceptable damage. In this situation, is it acceptable to declaw?

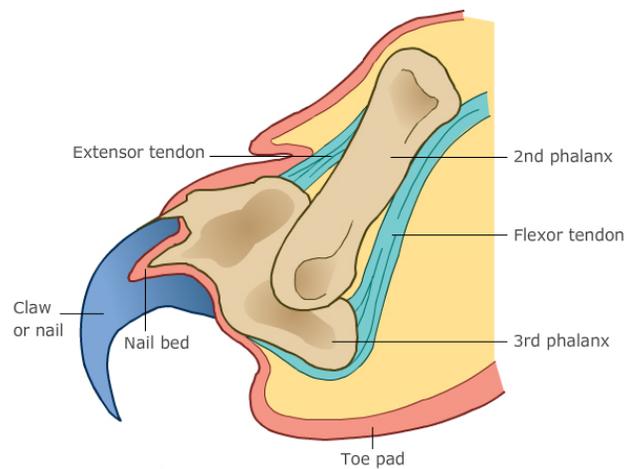
Declawing is a drastic but permanent solution to most scratching problems. As mentioned already, it may be avoidable with some attention to training and prevention. However, declawing is a quick and effective means of eliminating scratching problems when other options have been exhausted. In some homes, the issue comes down to the options of removing the cat from the home or having it declawed. In one study, it was estimated that as many as 50% of cat owners who declawed their cats would not have otherwise kept their cat.

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This might be the case where the cat continues to damage the furniture, or where the cat causes injuries to people during play or handling. Even the slightest scratch can have serious consequences when a member of the household suffers from an immunosuppressive disease or a disease such as diabetes. It might also be argued that the short-term pain and discomfort of declawing (which can be minimized with appropriate attention to pain medications) may be preferable to a life of constant confinement and excessive (and unsuccessful) attempts at punishment. Although it has been estimated that approximately 25% of cats are declawed in North America, declawing is considered immoral or even illegal in some jurisdictions and in some countries.

What is the effect of declawing on the cat?

There are many myths and anecdotal reports about the dire behavioral and surgical complications of declawing. In the past few years, a number of behaviorists, pet psychologists and epidemiologists have studied the effects of declawing on the cat, the owner, and the cat-owner relationship. At least 10 scientific studies have examined the consequences of declawing on the pet and on the pet-owner relationship. These studies show that declawing does not alter the cat's behavior. In fact, cats may continue to scratch furniture after declawing, but cause no damage. There is no increase in behavior problems. Declawed cats are not at greater risk of getting bitten or injured in catfights. Owners of declawed cats report a higher number of good behaviors than the owners of clawed cats.



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There is some speculation about whether declawed cats might be more prone to either biting or house soiling. In a study of biting frequency and intensity, declawed cats did not bite any more often or any more seriously than a control group of nondeclawed cats.

With respect to house soiling, some cats might find it uncomfortable to use their litter for the first few days after declawing, and may develop a litter avoidance problem during this time. Close attention to litter maintenance, the use of non-adherent litters and early attention to any emerging problems are generally successful at preventing litter box aversion. House soiling problems appear to be equally common in cats that have been declawed and those that have not.

The only consistently recognized effect of declawing is a few days of post-surgical discomfort. Therefore be certain to

discuss pain management options with your veterinarian prior to surgery.

When owners of declawed cats are asked to assess the effects of declawing on the cat-owner relationship, declawing always met or surpassed their expectations, and more than 70% indicated an improvement in their relationship with their cat. Declawing allows people to keep their cat and stop household damage.

What is a tendonectomy, and how does it compare to declawing?

Another surgery to reduce household damage associated with scratching is a “digital flexor tendonectomy.” In this procedure, the flexor tendon on each claw is cut so that the claw cannot be used for scratching. When compared to declawing, tendonectomy surgery resulted in less pain during the first two days post-operatively. However, after the tendonectomy you will need to regularly trim your cat’s nails, as they will continue to grow. Since the surgery alters the anatomy and prevents the claws from retracting normally, your cat may accidentally get its claws caught in the furniture. If it is difficult for you to properly maintain your cat’s nails, declawing may be the preferable option for your cat, as long as appropriate pain management is provided.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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