

FELINE DECLAWING

What is declawing?

Declawing is the surgical removal of the toenail and portion of bone from which it grows. In fact, 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. The healing process, to the time that the cat can walk, climb, knead and scratch comfortably, generally takes a few days to a few weeks. Your cat may be hospitalized for several days and pain management medications may be dispensed for a few extra days after sending your cat home. Depending on the procedure, a special kitty litter may be needed for a few days to prevent contamination of the surgery sites until the paws are entirely healed. Anecdotally, adult cats and those that are heavier may take longer to heal and adapt.



Should I get my indoor cat declawed?

Declawing is a surgical procedure on both front feet, which may be painful and affect the cat's mobility until it is healed; 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. Since most cats are not spayed or neutered until approximately 6 months of age, at the very least give your cat a chance to learn how to use its claws appropriately by teaching it where to scratch and where to climb. (See our handout on scratching). If you add in some partial

confinement or a few strategically placed booby traps, most cats can be prevented from doing damage without the need for surgery. Regular nail trimming and commercially available plastic nail caps can also be useful. Another consideration is that some cats are scratching as 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.

My cat is causing unacceptable damage. Can I declaw my cat?

Declawing is a drastic but permanent solution to most scratching problems and, as mentioned, 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. 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. 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 illegal in many countries outside North America.

What is the effect of declawing on the cat?

Many authors have written of dire behavioral and surgical complications of declawing, but these reports are based on myths and anecdotes. 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. There is some speculation about whether declawed cats might be more prone to either biting or housesoiling. 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 non-declawed cats. As for housesoiling, since cats might find it uncomfortable to use their litter for the first few days after declawing, it is possible that litter avoidance could arise at this time. However, close attention to litter maintenance, the use of non-adherent litters and early attention to any emerging problems are generally successful. Housesoiling problems appear to be equally common in cats that have been declawed and those that have not. Quite surprisingly the only recognized concern 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 over 70% indicated an improvement in their relationship with their cat. Declawing allows people to keep their cat and stop household damage. Normally, only the front claws need to be removed to prevent furniture damage.

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

Another surgery to reduce scratching is a "digital flexor tendonectomy", in which the tendon on each claw is cut so that it cannot be used for scratching. The surgery resulted in less post-operative pain for the first two days in comparison to declawing. However, after the tendonectomy you will need to regularly trim your cat's nails, as they will continue to grow and may catch on furniture because they will no longer be conditioned and worn down by scratching. Therefore with special attention to pain management, declawing may be the preferable surgery for owners who cannot properly maintain their cat's nails.