



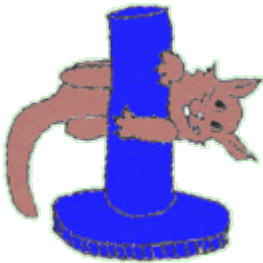
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Declawing and its Alternatives

Declawing has probably become the most controversial of all the elective surgical procedures commonly performed by veterinarians. While it is normal for cats to scratch things (to mark territory as well as to condition their claws) this behavior can destroy the bond between an owner and pet cat. Cats, especially adolescent cats, have a tendency to "play rough," scratching their owners sometimes violently in play. The declaw surgery represents a permanent solution to these problems. However, it is popularly held that a number of adverse conditions result from declawing, and that it is a form of mutilation. Pet owners need to sort out the facts from the rumors surrounding this procedure, as well as understanding all of the options involved.



TRAINING: A NON SURGICAL WAY TO SAVE THE FURNITURE



Scratching is a natural behavior of the cat, which makes it very difficult to modify. The usual goal is to transfer the cat's scratching instinct to a scratching post; it is virtually impossible to control the desire to scratch completely. In general, this kind of training requires a great deal of time at home. The following are

training tips:

Cats seem to prefer to scratch upholstery with a vertical drag to the fabric. Furniture can be upholstered in an unacceptable fabric and a scratching post can be swathed in an appropriate fabric (rather than the usual carpet).

Furniture can be made unacceptable by using plastic or even aluminum foil to cover the target pieces. Spray-on antiperspirants can be sprayed on the furniture as a repellent.

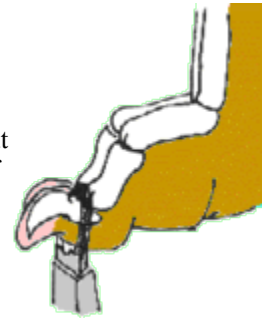
Treats or catnip can be used to attract the cat to the scratching post. The scratching post must be displayed near the cat's desired scratching location. Placing the scratching post in another room to get it out of sight will guarantee that the cat will not use it!

The cat can be punished for furniture scratching attempts but it is important that the cat not connect the punishment with the person administering it (other wise the cat will simply learn not to scratch while that person is watching). Yelling, spanking, or shaking a can with pennies in it is too directly associated with the person rather than the act of scratching. A water squirt bottle is better but only if the cat does not see where the squirt comes from. Booby traps can be set up using

balloons. If mouse traps are used, it is vital that they be turned upside-down so that the cat cannot possibly catch a foot in the trap. Stacked traps can be set up so that they pop upward when tripped, making a surprising noise. In this way, punishment can still be carried out when the owner is not at home. Many owners are not excited about putting mousetraps up against their living room furniture, upholstering in aluminum foil, or decorating sofas and chairs with balloons. It is easy to see why a surgical solution would be attractive.

DECLAW: THE RESCO CLIPPER METHOD

This is probably the most common method used by veterinarians to declaw cats as it is associated with the fastest surgery time. It involves the use of a sterile nail trimmer to cut through the bone of the third digit of the toe. The cat loses the part of the bone from which the claw grows. The incision is either sewn closed with suture material or closed in surgical glue.

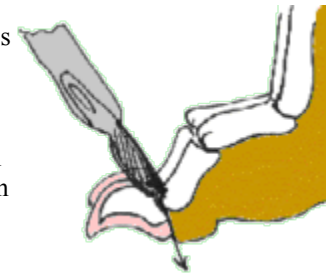


We do not use this procedure at our hospital.

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.

DECLAW: THE DISARTICULATION METHOD

This procedure is a bit more difficult to master as it involves the delicate disconnection of all the tiny ligaments holding the third bone in place. The entire third bone is removed in its entirety. The incision is then sewn closed with suture material *This is the preferred surgical procedure at our hospital.*



WHAT TO EXPECT/POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Because the entire third bone is removed, there is a zero possibility of the claw growing back; however, the cut ligaments allow for a very subtle drop in the way the foot is held. Most owners do not notice this change in posture and it does not seem to affect the cat at all.

Two nights in the hospital are required for this procedure (one night with bandages and one without)

Some spotting of blood is normal from the toes during the first few days at home (beware if white carpeting is present)

Shredded paper or pelleted recycled newspaper litter (such as Yesterday's News®) is recommended for 10 days after surgery. Conventional clay or sand litters can impact inside the tiny incisions and cause infections

MYTHS AND RUMORS: WHAT PEOPLE HEAR ABOUT DECLAWING

MYTH #1: AFTER DECLAWING A CAT IS LIKELY TO BECOME FEARFUL OR EXPERIENCE BEHAVIOR CHANGES IMPAIRING AN AFFECTIONATE RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS OWNER

Numerous scientific studies have been unable to document any behavior changes post-declaw. In fact, in one survey 70% of owners of declawed cats reported an improved relationship with their cat after the procedure.

MYTH #2: A DECLAWED CAT CANNOT CLIMB TREES

Declawed cats are not as effective at climbing trees as cats with claws, but declawing does not prevent tree climbing.

MYTH #3: A DECLAWED CAT CANNOT CATCH PREY

Declawed cats are not as effective at catching prey as cats with claws, but declawing does not prevent effective hunting.

MYTH #4: A DECLAWED CAT HAS LOST ITS ABILITY TO DEFEND ITSELF AND SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED OUTSIDE

This one is actually true. Without claws a cat has indeed lost an important part of its defense system. Memorial-610 Hospital for Animals feels strongly that declawed cats should be housed indoors only.

MYTH #5: DECLAWED CATS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BITE SINCE THEY CAN NO LONGER CLAW

Declawed cats do not seem to realize they have no claws. They will continue to scratch ineffectively as if they did not know the difference. Studies have shown no increased biting tendency after declawing.

MYTH #6: THE POST-OPERATIVE PERIOD INVOLVES TREMENDOUS PAIN

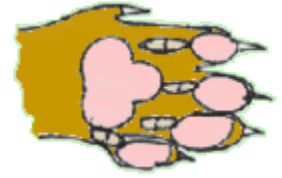
The declawed cat will indeed have sore feet after surgery. The larger the cat, the more the discomfort and reluctance to bear weight. Pain relievers are often prescribed. However, this recovery period should not last longer than a week or so. Healing should be complete by two weeks.

MYTH #7: A DECLAWED CAT WILL NOT USE A LITTER BOX AGAIN

It is very important that litter not get impacted in the declaw incisions during the recovery period. Shredded paper is the usual recommendation during recovery and some cats simply will not use shredded paper. The recycled newspaper litters are an excellent alternative. The only litter problem one might expect would be lack of acceptance of a new litter during the recovery period. Declawed cats do not lose their litterbox instinct.

TENDONECTOMY: A SURGICAL ALTERNATIVE TO DECLAWING

This surgical procedure is gaining popularity with owners who are concerned about the recovery period with a conventional declaw. Here, a ligament is cut on the underside of each toe to prevent grasping motions. The claws remain but the cat cannot extend them.



WHAT TO EXPECT/POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Because the incisions needed for this procedure are so small, the recovery is minimal. No bandages, no special litter, no blood spotting. There are usually no stitches to remove and the tiny incisions are closed in surgical glue.

Because the cat can no longer make grasping motions, the claws will naturally grow in a circular manner into the foot pads causing pain and infection unless the owner is able to trim the nails on a regular basis. (The tendonectomy patient will require life-long management in the form of regular nail-clipping). Studies have shown that clients are generally more dissatisfied with tendonectomy long-term than with declawing. Many cats who have previously have tendonectomy surgery have later had declawing as the owners were unable to properly care for the nails or the cat keep getting the nails caught and causing trauma. We do not perform flexor tendonectomies at Memorial-610 Hospital for Animals.

SOFT PAWS®

This is another popular method of controlling a scratching problem. Blunt acrylic nail caps are glued onto the cat's claws. The idea is that the blunt nail will not be sharp enough to cause damage. The hospital staff will place the first set but after this, the owner has the option of placing the caps him/herself at home.



WHAT TO EXPECT/POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

The nail caps will wear off but not at the same time. After a couple of weeks some of the nails will be capped and others will not be.

The nail caps must be replaced as the nail grows out. Some cats are not in the least discouraged from scratching by these caps and are able to simply scratch larger holes in the upholstery.

The most important thing in making a claw management decision is making a decision that you are happy with. There are positives and negatives with each procedure. If you have further questions do not hesitate to bring them up to your veterinarian.

Adapted from "Declawing and its Alternatives" by Wendy C. Brooks, DVM, DABVP