

Cat Scratching & Alternatives to Declawing

Cats need to scratch. It's their form of nail care, and it feels good to them! They scratch during play, they scratch to stretch and to climb, to defend themselves, to mark territory, and to remove worn outer claws. Unfortunately, this natural behavior can sometimes pose an inconvenience and damage furniture or carpeting, but there are a few ways to help alleviate these problems.

What is Declawing?

The term "declaw" is actually a misnomer. Declawing is a surgical procedure that requires anesthesia and involves the amputations of both the toe bones and the claws, and additionally severing the elastic ligaments that allow a cat to extend and retract its toes. The human equivalent is an amputation of all your fingers at the first knuckle, or amputating the first knuckle of your toes.

In addition to potential medical risks, like bacterial infections, declawing can also result in physiological complications. A cat's weight is mostly distributed on their toes, declawing forces them to shift their weight to their wrists. This can make simple movements like walking or jumping difficult or even painful. Leftover bone fragments in the paws from the bones that were amputated can also result in additional pain and discomfort when the cat walks. Feet sensitivity after declawing is a leading reason why cats may avoid the litterbox, as stepping in litter is uncomfortable to their tender paws. Because their first line of defense is gone, declawed cats can also be prone to developing behavioral issues like anxiety and aggression, and are more prone to bite when they are feeling threatened or frustrated.

Declawing should only be considered as a last resort if all other alternatives have been tried and euthanasia is being considered, or if the owner has a compromised immune system or illness that would make them susceptible to serious infections if scratched. If you currently have a declawed cat, or choose to declaw any future cats, never let them outdoors, as they will have no manner of defense.

Alternatives to Declawing

- Offer appropriate scratching surfaces, like scratching posts. Some cats prefer horizontal scratchers; others like vertical or slanted posts. Vertical posts must be sturdy enough not to rock or shift when used and tall enough for your cat to stretch his body. Try posts made of cardboard, short (not shag) carpeting, wood, sisal or upholstery. Once you figure out your cat's preference, put posts of that kind in several locations. Encourage your cat to investigate her posts by scenting them with catnip, hanging toys on them, playing with your cat near the posts, and placing them in central areas near where she naps, perches, and plays.

- Discourage inappropriate scratching by removing or covering objects you don't want her to use. Turn speakers toward the wall. Put double-sided sticky tape, sandpaper or upside-down vinyl carpet runner (knobs up) on furniture or on the floor where your cat would stand to scratch your furniture. Place scratching posts next to these objects, as more acceptable alternatives.
- Trim your cat's nails regularly. It is important that your cat does not view having her nails trimmed as a negative experience, so always be sure to provide a relaxed, positive atmosphere. Invest in a good pair of nail clippers specifically designed for cats, not dog or human nail clippers or scissors, which may cause discomfort or infection. Desensitize your cat to having her paws touched and flexed before attempting to trim her claws; give her treats as she allows you to handle her paws without fuss. When trimming her nails, have someone assist you and hold the cat. For anxious or fearful cats, towel-wrapping can be a safe and effective method of restraint, and will often help them feel secure. There is a resource handout on the method of towel-wrapping cats available to download on our website.

If you feel uncomfortable trimming your cat's nails, you can have your veterinarian or groomer do it for you.

- Consider putting plastic caps on your cat's claws. Similar to nail-trimming, these caps make it so that your cat will do no damage if she scratches (and they're stylish, too!) These caps must be replaced every four to six weeks as the claws grow and push them off.
- Try pheromone therapy. Synthetic pheromone products are often recommended by veterinarians to help curb undesirable behaviors such as scratching.
- Use a water "squirt gun". If you catch your cat in the act of scratching furniture, try startling her with a spritz of water. Do it discreetly without yelling or drawing attention to yourself. You want your cat to think the water came out of nowhere so she associates it with the act of scratching in that area, not with you.

What Not to Do

- *Do not* hold your cat by the scratching post and force her to drag her claws on it. This can scare her and convince her to avoid the post entirely.
- *Do not* throw away a favorite scratching post when it becomes unsightly. Used posts appeal to your cat because of their comforting, familiar smell.