



Cat Scratching & Alternatives to Declawing

Scratching is a natural feline behavior that cats both inherit and learn. It primarily serves to maintain the claw movements needed for hunting and climbing. Moreover, scratching sharpens claws by shedding old layers and allows cats to stretch their bodies. It also plays a crucial role in visual and olfactory (scent) communication. Owners can guide this behavior towards acceptable areas to prevent destructive scratching.

WHAT IS DECLAWING?

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 cats may avoid the litterbox, as stepping in litter is uncomfortable to their tender paws.

Declawed cats may be prone to developing behavioral issues like anxiety and aggression and are more prone to bite when they are feeling threatened or frustrated.

WHAT IF THERE ARE IMMUNOCOMPROMISED PEOPLE IN THE HOME?

It is true that Cat Scratch Disease spreads via scratches, but the organism that causes this disease is found in flea dirt, so treating for and preventing fleas will eliminate that risk. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) does not recommend declawing to prevent transmission of Cat Scratch Disease. The CDC also does not recommend declawing to protect immunocompromised people. Instead, the CDC and veterinarians recommend regular nail trims (every 4-6 weeks), regular flea prevention, and avoiding rough play with cats.

ALTERNATIVES TO DECLAWING

Provide Suitable Scratching Surfaces

- Examples are scratching posts or pads, cardboard boxes, cat trees, and lumber or logs.
- Scratching surfaces should be offered in multiple locations around the home, in both horizontal and vertical options.
 - » Cats often scratch and stretch after sleeping, so a scratcher should be placed by their favorite sleeping areas.
 - » Cats also like to scratch to mark their territory with their scent, place scratchers in different areas around the home that the cat often passes or stops at.
- Scratching surfaces should be tall or long enough to allow full stretching and stable enough so they do not move or fall over.
- Scratching materials preferred by cats include wood, sisal rope, carpet, cardboard, and rough fabrics.
- Owners may need to experiment with a variety of textures and types of scratchers to determine which scratchers the individual cat prefers.

- Cats and kittens can be trained to use scratchers by enticing the cat to the item with catnip, treats, or toys, and by rewarding them for being near or on the scratcher.
- Cats should be positively reinforced and never punished.

Provide Claw Care by Regularly Trimming Nails

- Nail trimming frequency depends on the cat's lifestyle but can typically be done every 4-6 weeks.
- Nail trimming should be done with proper feline nail trimmers to prevent splintering of the nails.
- Trim nails in a calm environment and provide positive reinforcement for the cat, like high value cat treats.

Temporary Synthetic Nail Caps

- Caps are glued over the trimmed nail and need to be reapplied every 4-6 weeks.
- You may work with your veterinarian or local groomer to help you with nail trimming or applying nail caps.

Synthetic Facial Pheromone Sprays and/or Diffusers

- Application of synthetic facial pheromone sprays on the desired scratcher may induce scratching behavior on an appropriate target.

Deter Scratching on Undesired Surfaces

- Cover objects with loose fitted fabric, double sided tape, foil, or plastic
- Place appropriate scratchers next to undesired scratching surfaces and provide positive reinforcement like treats when they use the appropriate surface
- When your cat scratches an undesired surface, remember not to scold, or yell at them. Instead, calmly pick them up and place them on the object you want them to scratch, then provide positive reinforcement when they use the desired scratcher.