

Declawing Fact Sheet

A common question we get asked about is what is declawing. In addition to being illegal in some European countries and Canada many animal shelters now have a "no declawing" adoption policy. Some people view declawing as a necessary procedure for indoor cats. This is absolutely not true. The cat-unfriendly products made for scratching that dominate the pet supply industry and the lack of sound information available to clients have left most feeling as if there were no alternative.

What is declawing?

Declawing is not a simple "nail" removal as most think. It involves an actual amputation of the digit, roughly comparable to taking your finger off at the first knuckle. This is an aggressive procedure. Both the surgery itself and the recuperation period can be stressful on the cat. Declawing is an amputation on all ten toes. If considered, the cat will require pain management and an indoor only lifestyle.

How does declawing affect a cat's behavior?

Declawing a cat can lead to biting as a first defense. They may become more difficult to handle. Anyone who has been bitten will chose a scratch over a bite.

This behavior problem difference can be serious. A cat's first line of defense is its nails. When he perceives that he no longer has that defense, he will use his next best option, his teeth. A cat bite is much more dangerous, to humans and other animals as well, than a cat scratch.

Even if you are being responsible by not exposing your cat to the dangers of being outside, doors and windows do get left open on occasion. A declawed cat that gets outside already has a major strike against him by not having all of his defenses against dogs and other cats.

Why do cats scratch?

Cats don't scratch simply to be destructive. There are several reasons why they scratch.

- Cat's nails grow in layers, and they need to scratch on something to shed the outer sheath. Otherwise the nail will grow into their pad.
- Cats have scent glands in the pads of their feet. They scratch to mark the area with their scent. This is why declawed cats still "scratch" at a post or furniture.
- A cat will scratch on the post to relieve frustration or stress.

Why People Think They Should Declaw Their Cat

"My Cat is destroying my furniture"

Cats scratch as a normal species behavior; it's part of their nature and part of their hygiene. The key is to provide alternative scratching areas. A good scratching post, made with the right material, will turn out to be more attractive to your cat than your furniture. Your cat's life span is 16 years or more; he or she will be an important part of your family much longer than any furniture you have.

"My other cat is declawed"

Cats with and without nails can live together without any problems. Very rarely do cats use their claws on each other. We know several already-declawed cats that live peacefully among the rest of the cats who have claws.

"I don't want my cat scratching my children."

Cats are no more likely to scratch a child than they are to scratch another cat in the house, unless provoked. Teach your children how to pet and play with the cat, as well as how to watch for signs that the cat is getting over-stimulated or stressed and therefore needs to be left alone. Keep the cat's nails trimmed! It's easy, it's painless, and it can help to avoid accidental scratches and hurt feelings.

What are the alternatives to declawing?

Once owners understand scratching behavior and realize that it is not meant to be destructive, they are usually ready to explore other alternatives. There are several very simple things you can do to save your furniture and your cat's toes.

First of all, get one or more scratching posts. Offer these as alternatives to your furniture. If you get the right scratching post, your cats will be much happier scratching on it instead of on your furniture.

- Posts made out of carpet are not ideal. The post should be made out of a fabric that is not similar to anything in your house, preferably a sisal-weave material. The cat condos made out of tree trunks and carpet are also great because cats like the feel of the bark.
- Short scratching posts do not work either. A post should be tall enough for your cat to fully stretch to the top, and it should also be sturdy.
- Make sure that you place your scratching post wherever the cats are presently scratching or in a high "cat traffic" area. The cats will not use a post that is placed in some corner that they never visit. If you also have a cat condo, place it at a window where it will get sunlight and attract your cats to use it. This is convenient because their favorite time to scratch is after taking a nap.
- Grass doormats and cardboard scratching pads can be used for those picky felines who prefer horizontal surfaces. Always offer every cat horizontal and vertical surfaces.

Getting cats to use these items is easy. Sprinkle catnip on the area and use feather toys for them to chase up the post. This acts as both bonding time and positive reinforcement.

There are methods you can use to discourage unwanted scratching. You can temporarily place aluminum foil or two-sided tape on your furniture, because cats do not like the feel of these objects. Place your scratching post next to this spot, since your cat will immediately look for a different surface after touching the foil or tape. You can also use scents that cats do not like, but which are not unpleasant for people. Ginger and citrus are effective deterrents as is any aromatic scent.

Here are some other pointers:

- Keeping your cat's nails trimmed will minimize damage done if your cat occasionally strays from the post. It also makes it less painful for your cat to show affection!

- Keep in mind that for kittens there is a difference between scratching and using their claws to climb. Until they are larger, they cannot jump, and so their climbing may be misconstrued as unwanted scratching behavior.

Resources At Our Clinic

- The sisal-weave posts carried at our office work better than any other post that we have seen. They are sold with a money-back guarantee that your cats will use them.
- We can also teach you how to trim your cat's nails.
- As a last resort, we offer a product called **Soft Paws**. They are plastic caps you put on the ends of a cat's nails (using a non-toxic adhesive). You certainly may call us for more information on this product, but most clients find this alternative to be unnecessary.

There are many reasons why cats scratch. There are also many reasons why declawing is not a good answer. The non-surgical alternatives are less expensive and less painful than declawing. Please keep these in mind; your cat will be a happier and healthier lifetime member of your family.



To properly trim your cat's nails:

- 1) Hold the paw firmly in your hand
- 2) Press gently on the pad to extend the nail
- 3) Using recommended nail trimmers, cut the nail close to the quick (pink area) without going into it.