

The Facts

about Declawing: What Every Cat Owner Should Know

There are a lot of reasons people decide to declaw their cats. They're frustrated about scratched-up furniture or drapes, they're worried about being scratched themselves, or they just feel that a declawed cat is easier to live with. Most cats are declawed as very young kittens, before they display any kind of inappropriate scratching behavior. What most people don't realize is that declaw surgeries are banned or considered extremely inhumane in 24 nations, with countless more working toward that goal...and there's a good reason why.

What's so important about claws?

People, like most mammals, walk on the soles of their feet; cats are a completely different story. Cats are "**digitigrade**," which means that they walk on their toes. Everything about a cat's anatomy is designed to distribute its weight across its toes, and claws are a critical part. Unlike a person's fingernail, which is separate from the bone, a cat's claw is actually a part of the final bone in each toe, and is vital for balance, exercise, and stretching.

A cat's toes also help the cat's paws meet the ground at a precise angle to keep all of its joints aligned correctly: legs, shoulders, and back. When a cat gets declawed, the entire last joint of every toe is amputated causing their feet to meet the ground at an unnatural angle and throwing off the alignment of all the cat's muscles and joints. If you've ever worn uncomfortable heels and had your back suffer the consequences, or experienced arthritis or other joint pain, you know exactly how a declawed cat feels every day.

I thought it was just a simple surgery!

Because the claws in a cat's paws are actually a part of the bone, there is no simple way to declaw a cat. The surgery, technically called *Onychectomy*, requires ten separate, painful amputations of the entire distal phalanx of each toe; the human equivalent would be the amputation of the final joint of each finger. A scalpel, guillotine-like cutter, or laser is used to cut through muscle, tendon, ligament, and bone...no matter how it's done, it is not a minor, painless surgery. Laser declawing is often touted as a less painful and damaging alternative to traditional

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declawing, but the truth of the matter is that while using a laser instead of a scalpel reduces bleeding and recovery time somewhat, the nature of the procedure is no different: it is still amputation.

And regardless of what method is used, the rate of complication is relatively high. Improperly done declaw surgeries result in permanent nerve damage, hemorrhage, bone chips that prevent healing, chronic

back and joint pain, lameness, and perhaps most disturbingly a painful regrowth of deformed claws inside the paw. In the case of regrowth, another extensive surgery is required to correct the problem. Abnormal regrowth of the nerves in the toes may occur as well, causing the cat pain with every step it takes for the rest of its life.

In addition to medical complications, cats that have undergone declaw surgeries also frequently show a dramatic change in personality and behavior. When you remove a cat's claws, you take away its natural line of defense. A

cat that feels unable to defend itself may become antisocial, spending its time tucked away in unreachable places to avoid the

perceived predators from which it can no longer protect itself. Alternately, it may become overly aggressive with the last defense it has left: its teeth. The friendly cat you adopted may be gone for good, replaced with a cat that is nervous, fearful, and violent.

No matter what tool is used, serious complications are common.

As if all of this wasn't enough, declawed cats frequently refuse to use their litter boxes! When a cat scratches in the box following surgery, it may associate the pain in its paws with the litter box...an association that often becomes permanent.

Other declawed cats that can no longer deal with the pain of marking territory with the scent-glands in their paws resort to marking with urine instead. According to the World Small Animal Veterinary Association, well over half of all cats that are declawed immediately begin having inappropriate elimination problems; over the course of a few years following surgery, the numbers only increase.

Declawed cats often associate the pain in their paws with the litter box... permanently.

The Alternatives

The good news is that there are plenty of simple, painless alternatives to declawing that can keep both cat and owner (and owner's furniture) happy! Claw training a cat is probably the easiest; check out the claw training guide in this packet to find out how simple it is to keep both a happy, healthy cat and a home full of nice furniture. Trimming a cat's claws is also quite simple, and requires nothing more than a clipper and a little time spent getting your cat used to having his paws handled. And if your cat still won't use a scratching post or let you trim his nails, why not give nail caps a try? These small rubber caps are 100% safe, and allow the cat to keep up his natural scratching and stretching motions without doing any damage to his targets.

The real tragedy of declawing is that in almost every case, it is pre-emptive and unnecessary. Declawing is a non-therapeutic surgery, and like tail-docking and ear-cropping in dogs, doesn't benefit the cat. And all too many times, a cat that was loving and well-mannered prior to surgery is returned to a shelter because of the behavior problems it would never have developed if its paws had been left intact. The United States and Canada are alone in the western world as the only nations where declawing remains commonplace; hopefully, with a little extra knowledge, we can work together to make a change for the better.