

THE PET HEALTH LIBRARY

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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 or other pets in play, sometimes violently. Claws serve to mark territory and assist in communicating territorial messages to other cats though this behavior can be undesirable when it is directed against furniture. 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 cats, which makes it 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. Training tips include:

- 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. Double stick tape can be used on furniture to create an undesirable scratching area.
- Treats or catnip can be used to attract the cat to the scratching post.
- 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 (otherwise 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.

Nail Trimming

For some cats, simply keeping the nails short is adequate control but many people do not know how to trim their cat's nails. In fact, the non-pigmented nail of the cat makes it easy to see where not to cut. This [video on YouTube](#) shows exactly what to do.

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 veterinary staff will place the first set but typically after that the owner has the option of placing the caps 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.

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.

What to Expect / Possible Complications

- 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 of that with white carpeting).
- 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 the tiny incisions and cause infections.

- Pain medication is a good idea, especially for larger or older cats. The amount of weight carried on the feet (the size of the cat) is the biggest factor in post-operative pain. We recommend the use of the [fentanyl patch](#) for post-operative pain control.
- 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.
- If the unguis crest of the nail (the area from which the claw grows) is not removed, the claw may be able to partly grow back and a second surgery will be needed.

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.

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 subtle drop in the way the foot is held. Most owners do not notice this change in posture.
- Two nights in the hospital are required for this procedure (one night with bandages and one without).
- Some spotting of blood from the toes is normal during the first few days at home (beware of this with white carpeting).
- 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 the tiny incisions and cause infections.
- Pain medication is a good idea, especially for larger or older cats. The amount of weight carried on the feet (the size of the cat) is the biggest factor in post-operative pain. We recommend the use of the [fentanyl patch](#) for post-operative pain.

New Controversy: The Laser Declaw

Recently, the laser declaw has received a great deal of attention. In this surgery, a laser rather than a scalpel blade is used to disarticulate the third toe bone. Advantages of laser surgery include virtually no bleeding (during surgery or afterwards), less post-operative pain, and in many cases, no bandages.

So what makes this procedure controversial?

First, there is the cost of the laser equipment, which is \$20,000 to \$40,000. To justify such an expense, the laser must be able to generate substantial revenue for the veterinary hospital. This means that the cost of the laser declaw to the pet owner is likely to exceed the price of the conventional declaw by an additional \$50 to \$150 dollars.

Second, the issue of operator experience becomes important. Commercial laser machine companies are marketing heavily to the veterinary profession. These companies present the laser equipment they are trying to sell as being simple to operate, and provide all-day seminars for training. The problem is that a laser is a sophisticated piece of medical equipment and there is a learning curve involved before it can be utilized perfectly. Complications such as the burning of tissue and delayed healing are more likely with a less experienced user. Perhaps someday all veterinary schools will have a laser for students to practice on and lasers will be more common in all practices, but for now it is still a new technology with few experienced users.

If you are interested in the laser declaw (and the extra expense is not a deterrent), be sure to ask your veterinarian how long they have been performing the laser declaw, how many they have done, and (if possible) visit a recovering patient in the hospital.

The bottom line is that the laser declaw has a great deal to offer but at this time may not be the best choice for every patient.

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.

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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.

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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.

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MYTH #4: *A declawed cat has lost its ability to defend itself and should not be allowed outside.*

This one is true. Without claws, a cat has indeed lost an important part of his defense system. I feel strongly that declawed cats should be housed indoors only.

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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.

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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 discomfort there is 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. Pain after this recovery period is not normal or expected in any way and if a declawed cat seems to be uncomfortable or lame, a recheck appointment is definitely needed.

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MYTH #7: *A declawed cat will not use a litter box again.*

It is 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 litter box instinct.

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.