

# Declawing and Alternatives

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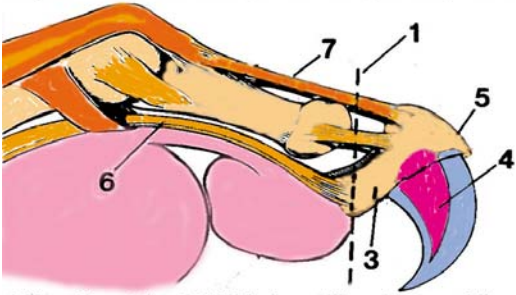
## Should I Declaw My Cat?

You should discuss with your veterinarian why you want to declaw your cat, what other methods you have tried to alleviate the problem behavior, or if there is a medical necessity to declaw, and the actual procedure of declawing. Once you have the facts about the procedure and the alternatives to it, you can decide if this is what you want for your cat and you.

Scratching is not a behavior problem. It is a natural function of a cat, and it is important to the health of their toes and nails. Physiologically, cats walk on their toes. Because of the structure of the toe and claw, declawing requires the removal of the last joint of the cat's toe. Cats use their claws for balance, jumping, climbing, self-defense, and grooming, and declawing forces your cat to walk unnaturally. There is some evidence that some declawed cats develop arthritis as a result of the unnatural posture forced upon them as a result of the declaw surgery. As cat owners/guardians, there are many steps we can take to help our cats scratch "appropriately" before considering declawing our pet.

## What Is Declawing?

*Onychectomy: "Declawing" - Feline Digital Amputation*



1. Line of Amputation; 2. Third Phalanx; 3. Ungual Process; 4. Ungual Crest; 5. Flexor Tendon; 6. Dorsal Ligaments - are all severed and amputated in the declawing surgery. Declawing involves 10 separate and painful amputations.

Adapted from: Textbook of Small Animal Surgery 2nd ed; Slatter D, W.B. Saunders Co.

A cat's claw is part of the last bone in the cat's foot, called the Distal or Third Phalanx. The claw is embedded within this bone. Because of this anatomy, in order to avoid claw regrowth or abscessation (infection), the Distal Phalanx and claw are removed at the joint. This is the amputation of the third joint and claw of each toe. This procedure is completed with the use of a scalpel, a guillotine knife, or a laser.

## Is Laser Surgery Better Than A Traditional Declaw?

There are definite advantages to laser surgery. Use of a laser causes less bleeding and swelling, reducing pain and complications immediately following the surgery. The rate of long term complications is the same. It is essentially the same procedure, just with different equipment.

## What About a Tendonectomy?

A tendonectomy or tenectomy is severing the (deep digital flexor) tendon between the second and third phalanx, or joints. While the cat keeps his claws, he is no longer able to extend them. This procedure requires regular owner upkeep of the cat's claws, particularly trimming, because the cat cannot scratch to remove nail husks while the claws continue to grow. Without regular and proper maintenance claw maintenance by the owner, this procedure could result in serious problems in the health of your cat's toes and paws.

### **Is There Any Risk To Declawing?**

There are risks any time a surgical procedure is performed. Please discuss this issue with your veterinarian.

Any time a cat is put under anesthesia there is a risk of disability or death. Statistics on the rate of complications vary from as high as 29% (post-surgery discomfort/pain as reported by owners, Landsberg, 1991) to as low as 1.4% (as recorded computerized abstracts & medical records from a teaching hospital, Pollari *et al.*, 1996). Potential physical complications include: hemorrhaging immediately following surgery or upon removal of bandages; regrowth of nail (would require additional surgery to correct); sequestrum or shattered nail or bone which causes infection/abscess; lameness or non-weight bearing; infection of incision site, joint stiffness or arthritis; and pain. Pain management is necessary following any major surgery. In addition, there is evidence that some declawed cats develop behavioral issues, such as jumping on tables more often than intact cats, litterbox avoidance, and biting.

### **Are There Alternatives To Declawing?**

Yes there are.

- 1) Cats can be trained to scratch on appropriate scratching posts or pads, and not on the family couch. There are many different types and styles of scratching equipment available. Some are vertical, some are horizontal. There are many different types of scratching material available: cardboard, carpeted posts, sisal posts and pads, rubber pads, bark posts – the list is long and varied. Placement/location of the scratching equipment is often very important. Using the proper material, whether vertical or horizontal, placement in the right location is often the key to discouraging destructive scratching and developing appropriate scratching behavior.
- 2) Most cats learn to accept getting their claws trimmed. Ask your veterinarian to show you how to do this properly. Trimmed claws cause much less damage to furniture, carpet, and humans than sharp claws, IF the cat does scratch inappropriately.
- 3) There are plastic nail caps for the claws so while training the cat to use appropriate scratching areas, and not to scratch people, there will be no damage done. For persistent scratchers, the nail caps can be a long-term solution as well. Ask your veterinarian about SoftPaws.™

### **Official Position Statements on Declawing and Cosmetic Surgery**

#### ***American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)***

Please be advised that the official position of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) is that unless it is a medical necessity for the cat or if clawing presents a potential zoonotic (medical) risk to its owner(s), declawing should be considered only as a last resort and only after a full understanding of the declaw procedure and alternatives to it have been presented.

Please see the following link for full position statement and points that veterinarians should cover: <http://www.avma.org/onlnews/javma/apr03/030415c.asp>

### ***The Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA)***

The Cat Fanciers' Association recognizes that scratching is a natural behavior of cats and that cats may be defenseless without full use of their claws if they, either intentionally or unintentionally, go outdoors. Scratching damage to household furnishings can be minimized or avoided by routine clipping of the claws, the use of claw covers and by redirecting the cat's activity to acceptable surfaces.

CFA perceives the declawing of cats (onychectomy ) and the severing of digital tendons (tendonectomy) to be elective surgical procedures that are without benefit to the cat. Because of the discomfort associated with any surgery and potential future behavioral or physical effects, CFA disapproves of routine declawing or tendonectomy surgery in lieu of alternative solutions to prevent household damage. In certain situations, including high risk of injury or disease transmission to owners with bleeding disorders or compromised immune systems, declawing may be justified in order to maintain the cat-human bond.

Please see the following link for full Position Statement And Information Summary:  
<http://www.cfainc.org/health/declawing.html>

### ***American Animal Hospital Association***

Declawing of domestic cats should be considered only after attempts have been made to prevent the cat from using its claws destructively or when clawing presents a significant health risk for people within the household.

As with any elective surgery, the client should be advised of all advantages, disadvantages, and available options. Veterinarians have an obligation to provide cat owners with complete education with regard to declawing prior to performing the procedure.

Please see the following link for full Position Statement and points that veterinarians should cover: [http://www.aahanet.org/About\\_aaha/About\\_Position.html#declawing](http://www.aahanet.org/About_aaha/About_Position.html#declawing)

### ***American Association of Feline Practitioners***

The American Association of Feline Practitioners strongly believes that it is the obligation of veterinarians to provide cat owners with complete education with regard to feline onychectomy. There are significant misconceptions about normal feline behavior, and veterinarians are routinely presented with frequently asked questions.

Please see the following link for full Position Statement and points that veterinarians should cover: <http://www.aafponline.org/resources/statements/declawing.htm>

For more information about what declawing surgery entails, and additional resources for alternatives to declawing, please visit: [http://straypetadvocacy.org/html/declaw\\_detoe.html](http://straypetadvocacy.org/html/declaw_detoe.html)