

DECLAWING CATS: MYTH VS. FACT (Support A.1297/S.5084)



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Myth: “More cats will be relinquished to shelters and euthanized if declawing is not an option.”

Fact: According to the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy’s Shelter Survey, destruction of household objects does not even make the top 10 list of reasons why cats are relinquished to shelters. However, house soiling *does*. It is the *number 1* behavioral reason for giving up a cat. Why is this significant? Because behavioral studies suggest that after declawing, up to 15% of cats will develop house soiling from litter box aversion, a feline response to anxiety and/or pain. Aside from this, studies have shown that after their claws have been removed, up to 18% of cats either start biting, bite more frequently, or bite more forcefully. In 2006, an Animal Rescue League of Boston study reported house soiling and aggression to be the number 1 and 2 behavioral reasons why surveyed owners stated they would give up their cats. Shelter statistics and studies *do not* provide any evidence that declawing lowers the overall number of shelter relinquishments. However, ample statistics *do* show the two behaviors potentially most exacerbated by declawing are also *the biggest risk factors for cat relinquishment*. Needless to say, animal relinquishment wherever it occurs places financial burdens on already-strained shelters and often, the taxpayer.

Myth: “Immune-compromised people are more likely to contract illness if not given the option to declaw.”

Fact: *Nearly all* feline diseases that may be spread from cats to immune-compromised people are *not considered communicable by scratching*. Cat Scratch Disease, the *one feline disease* that may be transmitted through a scratch, is caused by infected flea feces contacting *any* wound. Therefore, controlling fleas is the recommended and most practical means of preventing this infection. Among many effective methods the Cornell Feline Health Center recommends to prevent zoonotic disease transmission to humans, declawing is *not* listed. According to the most recent medical review (an April 2015 Canadian Medical Association Journal article entitled “Reducing the Risk of Pet-associated Zoonotic Infections”), the recommendation is: “exercise caution when playing with cats to limit scratches; keep cats’ nails short (*declawing is not recommended*).” The CDC, NIH, U.S. Public Health Service and Infectious Diseases Society of America have also issued a joint position paper on zoonotic disease and HIV. In it, declawing was “not advised” to prevent spread of feline disease to individuals with HIV.

Myth: “Veterinarians are trained medical professionals and possess the discretion to make the best decision. They don’t agree with declawing bans and should not be told what to do.”

Fact: In 28 countries and multiple U.S. cities, declawing is recognized as an illegal act of animal cruelty. Elsewhere in the U.S., it is a highly controversial procedure not fully condoned by any veterinary medical association. In 2013, American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) committee members unanimously “condemned” the same declawing procedure being performed on wild or exotic cats of any size, due to adverse health effects. The AVMA and NYSVMS continue to refer to declawing of domestic cats as a “last-resort” procedure, but simultaneously the AVMA itself states that at last estimate, a whopping 14.4 million (24.4%) of U.S. domestic cats were declawed. More current estimates suggest a possibility of 22 million. With basic client education and so many sensible alternatives to declawing at our disposal, 24.4% underscores that “last-resort” is

not the reality. Many practicing veterinarians across the state, including NYSVMS members, have expressed disagreement with the NYSVMS decision to oppose the declaw ban. A multitude of veterinarians refuse to perform this procedure on ethical grounds, citing that it is an invasive convenience surgery with no medical benefit. The Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association is opposed to the procedure, and it was U.S. veterinarians who spearheaded banning declawing in those cities where it is now illegal. The Paw Project, a veterinarian-founded, widely supported agency that educates on the negative effects of declawing, has veterinarian leadership across the U.S.

Myth: “Since so many cats ‘seem fine’ after declawing, the extent of opposition to declawing must be unwarranted.”

Fact: A calculation based on the aforementioned studies suggests that as many as 2.1 to 3 million cats in the U.S. develop litter box aversion after declawing, and as many as 2.8 to 4 million may have increased biting. Anxiety and pain are major causes of these behavioral abnormalities in cats. Medically untrained cat owners are unable to make diagnoses, especially those that involve subtle or highly insidious clinical signs. It is also crucial to note that cats have evolved as a particularly stoic species and are known to withhold demonstrative behaviors, even during severe illness. As just one of many examples, cats with Grade IV dental disease (the most advanced level of tooth decay and dental infection) often do not appear to their owners to act or even eat differently despite a serious medical problem.

Myth: “Even though conventional declawing seems outdated and cruel, laser surgery does not have the negative effects and has brought the procedure into the 21st century.”

Fact: Even in instances where a laser may reduce bleeding and swelling, this applies only to the intraoperative and immediate postoperative periods. Regardless of the implement used, the anesthetic risk and long-term health and behavioral risks of declawing remain. Laser declawing, like conventional declawing, still involves at least 10 separate and painful amputations – each of the last bones in a cat’s toes.

Myth: “State and national veterinary associations do not support the declawing ban, so they must have scientific evidence shaping their opinion.”

Fact: Certain adverse effects of declawing are widely reported anecdotal observations in the veterinary field, and numerous well-known studies have documented post-declawing complications in significant numbers of cats. Despite this, wording of the AVMA position statement has given distinctly misleading impressions to many, including that “controlled studies” have failed to show behavioral abnormalities after declawing. It is not clearly stated that this is because no *controlled studies* specifically examining the behavioral effects of declawing have been published. In various *other* modes of scientific research, cats across multiple studies *were* found to display both physical and behavioral complications, even up to years later. Despite decades of pressure and controversy, and millions of patients in jeopardy, the veterinary profession still has not provided any strong evidence-based justification *for* performing this procedure.

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