

Cat Declaw Surgery

By Dr. Gordon Stull

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Cat declawing is a very controversial procedure. This article gives some very important information you should consider before deciding to having this procedure performed.

Cat declaw surgery involves the amputation of the entire last joint of each of the ten front toes. The procedure is done to prevent a cat from destructive behavior and to make the cat "safe" around people and other animals. More declawing is done in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world. Veterinarians often state that it is acceptable, ethical and even necessary, but a growing number of critics feel that this disfiguring and painful procedure has no place in well-pet medicine. The British Veterinary Medical Association has found the practice of cat declawing unethical; the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association and the Cat Fanciers Association recommend the procedure not be performed; and the American Veterinary Medical Association states: "the declawing of domestic cats is justifiable only when the cat cannot be trained from using its claws destructively.

While most declaw surgery is "successful" in terms of the cat's survival and wound healing, there are often other serious consequences. The toes of a cat are exquisitely sensitive, with a sense of touch similar to human fingers. Cutting off ten toes causes extreme pain, and may result in the "phantom limb" phenomenon-the feeling that an amputated toe is still there even after the stumps have "healed." Some cats refuse to use their litter pans after surgery, probably due to the discomfort of stepping in clay or sand with hyper-sensitive feet. Other cats undergo behavioral changes, becoming shy or even aggressive after "recovery" from declawing. The procedure which may have been intended to prevent the cat from scratching thus ends up causing the cat to soil the rug and bite people. And, of course, the declawed cat has lost an essential means of defense. While it is not recommended that any cat be allowed to run outdoors due to the numerous dangers, for a declawed cat the danger increases dramatically. And yet the behavior changes that frequently occur after declawing cause their human families so much frustration that they sometimes open the door in an effort to cope with the negative behavior.

Alternatives to surgical declawing include routine nail rimming (ask your veterinarian to show you how) and scratching posts (covered with carpeting, burlap, rope, cardboard, or bark). If a cat persists in scratching an undesirable area, a thick towel or piece of carpet can be draped to protect the furniture. Cover critical pieces of furniture with aluminum foil or plastic (a shower curtain liner or painter's tarp), or spray an odor repellent available at pet supply stores).

The decision ultimately lies with the cat's well-informed and caring human companion. The decision to live with a cat entails a true commitment to the cat's welfare and comfort and accommodation of the cat's needs as much as possible. Before asking a veterinarian to perform a "routine declaw surgery," cat caretakers should have tried the full panoply of declaw alternatives. If you feel you must have a declawed cat, check at local animal shelters to see if they have any for adoption who have already lost their claws. If you already have a declawed cat and would like another cat, it is not necessary to have the new cat declawed. Many veterinarians can advise you with specifics, and may have brochures available. If you would like more information on the ethics of and alternatives to cat declaw surgery, you may contact the author.

There are many types of cat scratching posts that can provide your cat with an alternative to using your favorite chair. Smart Cat Products, has information about NOT declawing right on the label of their scratching post. Check out their website at <http://www.esmartcat.com> and note that on most of their product pages they have information about helping cats play, preventing scratching on furniture, not declawing, etc.

Dr. Stull may be contacted at (609) 748-1114. More information about Atlantic Animal Health Center can be found at <http://www.atlanticanimal.net>.

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