

Declawing Your Cat

A cat's claw is a specialized toenail with an assortment of functions, including feeding, grooming, and territorial marking. The claw grows slightly in length but grows primarily in layers, like the layers of an onion. As older layers are shed, underlying sharper ones are revealed. When a cat scratches a surface, it does not sharpen its nail; rather, it removes the outer worn layers.

SURGICAL REMOVAL OF CLAWS

The elective surgery known as declawing or onychectomy involves removal of the last joint of each toe, along with the claw. It may be performed on the front paws only, but occasionally is performed on all four feet. Declawing results in the permanent elimination of damage or injury from claws. However, declawed cats will also have a decreased ability to climb trees and defend themselves.

This surgery is performed while the animal is completely anesthetized so that no pain is felt during the procedure. An injection of a morphine-type medication called buprinorphine is given prior to the procedure to provide pain relief during the post-anesthesia period. You will be given oral doses of this same medication to give to your kitty for the first few days after surgery. Each incision is typically left open and allowed to heal naturally. The paws are then bandaged before the cat regains consciousness. The compression bandages are usually removed the day after surgery. Most cats are sent home the day after surgery. However, many older and/or larger cats may need to be re-bandaged and possibly spend an additional night in the hospital. Special cat litter is recommended for the first two weeks after surgery. To view step-by-step photographs of an actual declaw procedure visit the **Virtual Surgery Suite** on our website.

Cats are in some pain during the immediate postoperative period, but most are comfortable by the time they are released from the hospital. A recently declawed cat will likely step gingerly for the first week or so after surgery. However, they recover rapidly and usually without complication. Rarely declawed cats may be reluctant to use the litter box, may show longer-term lameness or the incision(s) may become infected. The younger a cat is, the faster the recovery. Young cats often show no discomfort within a few days after the procedure.

ALTERNATIVES TO DECLAWING

Declawing is not the only way to minimize injury or damage from a cat's claws. Several alternatives are detailed below.

1.) Nail trimming: Periodic trimming of the sharp tips of the claw prevents serious injury to others or damage to property. After the nail is trimmed, it only takes a few weeks for the sharp tips to grow back. As long as the cat does not scratch inappropriate surfaces, such as furniture, regular nail trimming should be sufficient to prevent excess damage.

2.) Scratching posts: Many cats can be trained to use scratching posts. However, there are several variables associated with scratching posts that need to be considered.

a.) Number: Many cats prefer more than one scratching post. Place a scratching post near favorite pieces of furniture or in preferred locations.

b.) Size / Height: The scratching post must be long enough so that the cat can stretch out completely while scratching.

c.) Position: Some cats have a preference for the position of the scratching post. Consider placing the posts in horizontal, inclined or vertical positions.

d.) Material: Many cats have a preference for certain materials. Try covering the scratching post with different types of carpet or rope, bare wood or bark.

e.) Location: Some cats prefer to scratch in public, open spaces as part of their territorial display. Other cats prefer to scratch in more private areas such as closets.

f.) Enticements: To encourage your cat to use the scratching post try sprinkling it with catnip or attach dangly toys such as feathers or balls.

g.) Rubbing feet on post: Cats have scent glands in the pads of their feet. By rubbing their feet on the scratching post you can transfer their own scent to the post and thereby make them more likely to use the post.

When training a cat to use a scratching post be sure to use positive rewards (e.g., treats, affection) to encourage the desired behavior. Also, you can discourage a cat from scratching on particular items by covering them with plastic, aluminum foil, double-sided tape or other “unpleasant” materials, using deterrent sprays or spraying the cat with water when it is scratching inappropriately.

3.) Tenectomy: This is another less popular surgical approach that is probably less painful, has a shorter recovery time and may satisfy your reasons for wanting your cat declawed. This surgery involves cutting the ligaments that allow a cat to extend its claws. In this procedure, the claws are not removed, but are rendered essentially useless. The claws will continue to grow and are usually thick and irregular. Regular nail trimming is still necessary. Declawing can always be performed at a later date.

4.) Plastic Nail Caps: A non-surgical approach involves application of plastic caps (Soft Paws®), which are glued in place to cover each individual claw. The plastic tips are blunt, so that even if a cat goes through the motions of scratching, the effects are minimized. Depending on your cat’s temperament and tolerance, and on your patience and dexterity, this product provides a pain-free alternative. The nail tips are not permanent and will need to be reapplied frequently. Some cats must have new plastic tips re-glued every few weeks, while others manage to remove them the day they are applied. Some cats have allergic reactions to the glue used to attach the plastic tips. You can link to the Soft Paws website through our **Links of Interest** page under the **Products** section on our website.

FINALLY

There is no evidence that declawing a cat will make it more aggressive or more apt to bite. A cat that is aggressive before declawing will still be aggressive after declawing. Remember that this surgery does not treat the reason your cat scratches or bites, it will only eliminate the unpleasant results of scratching.

Young kittens that have not been declawed should be encouraged to use a scratching post. This does not mean, however, that all kittens are easily trained to use a scratching post, nor does it mean that an adult cannot be trained to scratch there.

Remember, not every cat needs to be declawed. The decision to declaw your cat must be made after carefully considering the risks, benefits and options.

If you ever have questions regarding any of the above information, please do not hesitate to contact us. Visit us online at www.WhiteBearAnimalHospital.com.

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