

The Facts about Declawing

There are many myths, misunderstandings, and strong opinions about declawing. If you are considering having this surgery done on your cat, please take a few minutes to learn about this major surgical procedure before you make a decision.

Many people report that they are happier with their cats after declawing, because it makes the cats "better pets." Unfortunately, many people have also discovered -- too late -- that declawing frequently causes far worse problems than it solves. There is no way to know ahead of time into which category *your* cat might fall. There are ways to solve behavior problems other than irreversible surgery. Ask for our informational handout on preventing furniture damage.

What is Declawing?

Declawing itself is the **amputation of each front toe at the first joint** (hind foot declaws are not commonly done). This is equivalent to you losing the entire tip of every finger at the first knuckle.

The Role of Cat's Claws

Claws perform a number of functions for the cat. By scratching various surfaces, cats create a visual and scent identification mark for their territory. Claws provide psychological comfort through kneading, help the cat climb to safety or a secure vantage point, build strength, and help the cat fully stretch his back and legs. A declawed cat never again experiences the head-to-toe satisfaction of a full body stretch.

Complications

Declawing is painful; and recovery can take up to a few weeks. Even after the surgical wounds have healed, there may be other long-term physical and psychological effects:

- **Post-surgical complications:** Lameness, abscesses, and claw regrowth can occur days, weeks, or even years after surgery.
- **Pain:** It's impossible to know how much chronic pain and suffering declawing causes. However, in similar procedures in humans, amputees report "phantom" sensations from the amputated part, ranging from merely strange to extremely painful. Cat's behavior may appear normal, but a lack of overt signs of pain does not mean they are pain-free.
- **Joint stiffness:** In declawed cats, the tendons that control the toe joints retract after the surgery, and over time these joints become essentially "frozen". The toes can no longer be extended, but remain fully contracted for the lifetime of the cat.
- **Arthritis:** Newly declawed cats shift their body weight backward onto the large central pad of the front feet and off the toes. Over time, this altered gait causes stress on the leg joints and spine, and can lead to damage and arthritic changes in multiple joints.

- **Litterbox problems:** Experts say that declawed cats have more litterbox problems than clawed cats. In one survey, 95% of calls about declawed cats related to litterbox problems, while only 46% of clawed cats had such problems -- and most of those were older cats, many with physical ailments that accounted for the behavior.
- **Biting:** A declawed cat is more apt to bite if s/he feels threatened, since the loss of its claws results in a loss of one of the cat's natural defenses.
- **Death:** There is always a small but real risk of death from any general anesthesia, as well as from hemorrhage or other surgical complications.

Remember: If a declawed cat is preferable to you or your lifestyle, consider adopting an already declawed cat!

Adopting an Already-Declawed Cat

Whether you are looking to specifically adopt a declawed cat or have fallen in love with one regardless of the cat's presence of nails or not, remember, declawed cats wind up in shelters for a variety of reasons, many of which are to no fault of their own. Not every declawed cat develops behavioral problems, but here are a few pointers to remember about your claw-less new companion.

- **Keep your declawed cat indoors.** Declawed cats have lost the ability to climb well, hunt well, and are not typically able to defend themselves successfully. Protect them by keeping them safe indoors with lots of fun, enriching stimuli.
- **Offer joint supplements.** Talk with your veterinarian about the appropriate time to add a joint supplement. These can be helpful to a declawed cat's stiff joints, but also to any older cat that may suffer from joint stiffness.
- **Offer easy access to the litterbox.** A low sided box with fine-grained litter will be preferable to most declawed cats. Also, make sure a litterbox on each level of your house is offered, especially to an older cat that may have trouble managing stairs.