



Declawing

Fundamentally Feline
www.FundamentallyFeline.com

Declawing is a controversial procedure, and many myths surround declawing. It is important that you understand why cats scratch, what declawing does, and what a cat experiences as a result.

What is declawing?

Declawing is the amputation of the first digit of each toe, comparable to taking off your fingers at the first knuckle. It is not a simple "nail" removal as the popular myth states.

It is an extremely painful procedure, and causes your cat great stress, not just right after surgery but also during the recuperation period and often for weeks and even months afterward.

If the procedure is not done correctly, the cat can lose part of her pads or, more commonly, there may be painful deformed re-growths that require additional surgery.

What is the effect of declawing on a cat?

Declawing can result in medical, emotional, and behavioral problems. The effects may appear immediately, or may occur even years after the surgery.

Medical issues: Declawing is an unnecessary amputation that is illegal in many countries and is being outlawed in areas of the United States. Re-growths (explained above) can cause the cat so much pain that she is unable to walk or even stand. A cat bears about 60% of her body weight on her front limbs. After declawing, she is forced to bear that weight on parts of her feet that are not intended to support her weight, so there can be bruising or lameness even years after surgery. We have seen cases where cats have had to undergo multiple "re-declaw" surgeries after experiencing re-growths on different toes at different times. Surgery is the only way to relieve their pain, which is similar to what you'd feel walking barefoot on broken glass.

Emotional issues: Your cat may withdraw and go into hiding after this surgery. She will feel helpless because you have taken away her primary defense. A declawed cat may resort to biting because you've left her no other way to ward off an unwanted advance.

Behavioral issues: Declawing a cat can lead to numerous behavioral problems including litter aversion, aggression issues, and biting.

- **Litter box aversion** occurs because the cat must stand in litter and bear weight on her mutilated toes, so she may associate pain with the litter box. Although many veterinarians recommend using soft litters or shredded newspaper after surgery, this does not necessarily prevent infection or pain associated with use of the litter box. Many of the cats we see with behavioral litter box aversion problems are declawed.
- Another serious consequence of declawing is **aggression**. Declawed cats tend to be more aggressive during vet visits, most likely because they associate their painful feet with a visit to the vet. These cats are often highly fractious and difficult to manage. You may incur additional expenses related to this behavior, such as sedation before your cat can be examined or treated. These cats are so terrified that they will use every defense mechanism they have remaining. Unfortunately, many owners and even some vets mistake a cat's fear for being "mean", and their subsequent handling of the cat merely reinforces their fear.

Often expectant parents are concerned about their cat possibly scratching a child. A cat will only scratch a human if provoked by fear or pain. If you teach the child how to touch the cat appropriately, and provide safe areas where the cat can escape the grasping hands of the child, the cat will not injure your child.

- A cat's first line of defense is her claws. When that option is taken away, she must resort to **biting**. Anyone who works with cats will tell you that a scratch is preferable to a bite wound any day! A bite is more dangerous due to the risk of serious infection.

Even if you keep a declawed cat indoors, accidents happen: windows get left open, or a visitor leaves a door open... A declawed cat is in grave danger if she ever gets outside alone! Not only is she defenseless, but she is seriously hampered if she tries to catch something to eat. She'll be unable to flee from dogs and other dangers by climbing.

Why do cats scratch?

Scratching is a normal feline behavior. There are many reasons why a cat may scratch, which include:

- **Marking:** cats have scent glands in the pads of their feet and they scratch to leave scent marks. They often do this to mark the belongings you share, such as the sofa.
- **Shedding the outer sheaths of the nail:** a cat's nails grow in layers (like an onion) and they need to scratch to shed the outer nail sheath, or the nail could continue to grow into the foot pad.
- **Relieving stress or frustration:** some cats may increase their marking (such as scratching and urine marking) when they are anxious.
- **Stretching:** watch how your cat s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-s as she scratches to flex her spine.
- **Exuberance:** sometimes your cat scratches just because it feels good!

How can I stop my cat from scratching?

You can't. It is impractical and unfair to expect cats to stop scratching entirely. You *can* try to understand and meet their scratching needs so that they won't damage your belongings.

Read the Feline Scratching Behavior handout for more information on how to focus your cat's instinctive need to scratch in appropriate ways.

Myths about Declawing

I have to declaw my cat because she's damaging the furniture.

Cats *will* scratch; it's part of their nature. The key is to provide alternative scratching areas. Good scratching posts, made with the right material, placed in the right locations, are more attractive to your cat than scratching the furniture. Cats prefer to scratch in pathways, high traffic areas where you and they pass through each day. This is where your scratching posts should be placed.

My other cat is declawed.

Indoor cats rarely use their claws on each other, so your declawed cat should not have problems with another cat that still has claws. For example, look at the dozens of cats that live together at cage-free shelters. Most of those cats have claws, but some do not, and they all get along just fine.

I don't want my cat to scratch the children.

Cats are no more likely to scratch a child than they are to scratch another cat: it won't happen unless the cat is provoked. Teach your children how to gently pet and play with the cat, and how to watch for signs that the cat is getting over-stimulated or stressed. Keep the cat's nails trimmed! It's easy, it's painless, and it can help to avoid accidental scratches and hurt feelings. Remember that a scratch wound is far less serious than a bite wound, but a declawed cat has only one choice for defense!

What about a tendonectomy?

Tendonectomy involves severing the tendons to the cat's toes so she can't control her claws. There is a high rate of complications, you still need to trim the cat's claws, and the cat can still claw to some extent. This is **not** an acceptable option.

My family doctor said that getting scratched could be dangerous.

Doctors often raise the issue of cats scratching when a person has a blood clotting disorder or certain other diseases. Often the doctor is uninformed about the reasons why a cat might scratch and unaware that a more-dangerous bite is more likely to occur if the cat is declawed. Most cat scratches are not deep enough to pose a problem even to a person who is taking blood thinners. In fact, the CDC, Center for Disease Control, does not recommend declawing for immune compromised individuals. With reasonable care, you can safely co-exist with your cat and her claws.

Resources

- The 100% sisal-weave scratching posts, ramps, and pads available through www.FundamentallyFeline.com work better than any other post that we have seen. They are designed to meet your cat's needs for a tall, sturdy scratching post, and are meticulously hand-crafted.
- Keeping your cat's nails trimmed will minimize damage done if your cat occasionally strays from the post.
- Read the Feline Scratching Behavior handout or watch the How-To video on this website entitled "How Does Your Scratching Post Measure Up?" to learn about selecting and placing scratching posts, and other related information.
- As a last resort, there is a product called Soft Paws. They are plastic caps you put on the tips of a cat's nails using a non-toxic adhesive. Most clients find this alternative to be tedious and unnecessary. The caps can pop off, and they need to be reattached periodically as the cat's claws grow. Cats sometimes find it frustrating to have the nail caps glued on, because their nature tells them to remove the outer nail sheath. Soft Paws are a temporary fix because they will not change the cat's behavior, they just curb the destruction.

The bottom line

There are many reasons why cats scratch. We've explained some of the many reasons why declawing is not the answer to undesirable scratching behavior.

The non-surgical alternatives are less expensive and less painful than declawing. It's never necessary to amputate her toes to stop your cat from unwanted scratching!

If you feel that you must have a declawed cat, adopt a cat that has already been declawed.

If you still feel the need to declaw your cat, even after learning exactly what declawing is and how it can affect your cat for years to come, we strongly recommend that you consider finding another home for the cat. That way, she will not have her toes amputated, and won't risk developing one of the many medical or behavioral problems that frequently result!

Visit <http://www.pawproject.org/> to learn more!