

Declawing and Alternatives for Cats



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Declawing (also known as onychectomy) has probably become the most controversial of all the elective surgical procedures commonly performed by veterinarians. While it is normal for cats to scratch things (to mark territory as well as to condition their claws) this behavior can destroy the bond between an owner and pet cat. Cats, especially adolescent cats, have a tendency to play rough, scratching their owners or other pets sometimes violently in play. Claws serve to mark territory and assist in communicating territorial messages to other cats though this behavior can be undesirable when it is directed against furniture. The declaw surgery is an instant permanent solution to these problems; however, it is popularly held that a number of adverse conditions result from declawing, possibly including chronic pain for the cat. Pet owners need an understanding all of the alternative options involved as well as what the actual facts are regarding this procedure.



A cat claws a chair. Illustration by Dr. Wendy Brooks

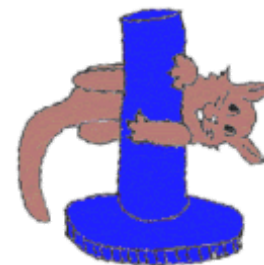
The American Veterinary Medical Association policy regarding declawing is: Declawing of domestic cats should be considered only after attempts have been made to prevent the cat from using its claws destructively or when its clawing is an above normal health risk for its owner(s).

Alternatives to Declaw Surgery to Try First

Scratching is a natural behavior of cats, which makes it difficult to modify. The usual goal is to transfer the cat's scratching instinct to a scratching post or other scratching toy; it is virtually impossible to control the desire to scratch completely. Some cats take quickly to alternative scratching surfaces while other cats require time-consuming training. Training tips include:

- Cats seem to prefer to scratch upholstery with a vertical drag to the fabric. Furniture can be upholstered in an unacceptable fabric and a scratching post can be swathed in an appropriate fabric (rather than the usual carpet).

- Furniture can be made unacceptable by using plastic, double stick tape or aluminum foil to cover the target pieces. Spray-on antiperspirants can be used on the furniture as a repellent.
- Treats or catnip can be used to attract the cat to the scratching post.
- The cat can be punished for furniture scratching attempts but it is important that the cat cannot connect the punishment with the person administering it (otherwise the cat will simply learn not to scratch while that person is watching). Yelling, spanking, or shaking a can with pennies in it is too directly associated with the person rather than the act of scratching. A water squirt bottle is better but only if the cat does not see where the squirt comes from. Booby traps can be set up using balloons. If mouse traps are used, it is vital that they be turned upside-down so that the cat cannot possibly catch a foot in the trap. Stacked traps can be set up so that they pop upward when tripped, making a surprising noise. In this way, punishment can still be carried out when the owner is not at home. The idea is to convince the cat that the furniture piece is not a good area for scratching and that the appropriate scratch toy can be used with no adverse experience.



Graphic by MarVistaVet

Many owners are not excited about putting mousetraps up against their living room furniture, upholstering in aluminum foil, or decorating sofas and chairs with balloons. It is easy to see why a surgical solution would be attractive. Fortunately, there are more options.

Nail Trimming

For some cats, simply keeping the nails short is adequate control but many people do not know how to trim their cat's nails. In fact, the non-pigmented nail of a cat makes it easy to see where not to cut. This [video on YouTube](#) shows exactly what to do.

Blunt Acrylic Nail Caps

This is another popular method of controlling a scratching problem. Blunt acrylic nail caps are glued onto the cat's claws. The idea is that the blunt nail will not be sharp enough to cause damage. The veterinary staff will place the first set but typically after that the owner has the option of placing the caps at home.

What to Expect

- The nail caps will wear off but not at the same time. After a couple of weeks some of the nails will be capped and others will not be.
- The nail caps must be replaced as the nail grows out.
- Some cats are not in the least discouraged from scratching by these



Acrylic nail caps. Photo by MarVistaVet

caps and are able to simply scratch larger holes in the upholstery.

For additional resources on dealing with claws at home, visit www.catfriendly.com/scratching.

Surgical Declaw (Onychectomy)

Despite our best efforts to deflect scratching or decrease claw sharpness, sometimes nothing works and an immediate, permanent solution is needed. It is important to consider that the declaw surgery alters the cat permanently and should not be done if alternative methods are effective. The cat will need some special care during the post-operative healing period: special litter, pain medication, and some activity restriction as he/she will have tender feet for a week or two after surgery. The declawed cat should be forever indoors or outdoors only with supervision as he/she will no longer have the ability to defend him/herself against dogs or other cats.

There is a great deal of controversy regarding this procedure and it has been legally restricted in many areas. Few veterinary surgeries encounter as much bias as the declaw, and a political movement has emerged. Some concerns are valid and some less so. Before making a declaw decision, it is important to review the arguments and find your own perspective. Here are some of the issues.

- The declaw is viewed by many as performing an unethical surgical alteration of a companion animal for the sake of convenience. This is frequently countered by the idea that convenience is not the issue but that the relationship between the pet and its owner is at stake. If that relationship fails, a much bigger life quality issue is at stake including relinquishing the cat to the shelter where euthanasia is a real possibility.
- Chronic pain may result from alterations in the foot anatomy and that long-term arthritis is promoted. While there may be truth to this, it is important to realize that 90% of cats over age 10 have arthritis in at least one joint. While it is certainly better to prevent arthritis in a cat's senior years if we can, we still need the cat to get to its senior years. Arthritis can be treated; euthanasia cannot.
- Some people believe that a cat's indoor only lifestyle is not humane because it is not natural, or an indoor only lifestyle may be impractical because of other people or other animals coming and going in the home. It is true that a declawed cat should become an indoor only pet for its own protection.
- There is belief that the procedure is performed too casually and that alternatives are not properly given consideration.

Research has been conducted to sort out truth from political propaganda. The AVMA has an excellent source where this [research has been collated](#) and the concerns are addressed. Here are some conclusions but feel free to examine the AVMA's information on your own.

Myth #1: *After declawing, a cat is likely to become fearful or experience behavior changes, impairing an affectionate relationship with his owner.*

Numerous scientific studies have been unable to document any behavior changes post-declaw. In fact, in one survey 70 percent of owners of declawed cats reported an improved relationship with their cat after the procedure.

Myth #2: *A declawed cat cannot climb trees.*

Declawed cats are not as effective at climbing trees as cats with claws, but declawing does not prevent tree climbing. That said, declawed cats should be kept indoors where they do not need claws to assist in self-defense.

Myth #3: *A declawed cat cannot catch prey.*

Declawed cats are not as effective at catching prey as cats with claws but declawing does not prevent effective hunting.

Myth #4: *A declawed cat has lost its ability to defend itself and should not be allowed outside.*

This one is true. Without claws, a cat has indeed lost an important part of his defense system. Declawed cats should be housed indoors only.

Myth #5: *Declawed cats are more likely to bite since they can no longer claw.*

Declawed cats do not seem to realize they have no claws. They will continue to scratch ineffectively as if they did not know the difference. As for biting, there have been some studies that show an increased tendency to bite in declawed cats while other studies have not shown that. The trouble in interpreting this information is that one of the reasons cats are declawed is to control aggression. A cat that is aggressive (even in play) will bite and scratch more than a cat that is not aggressive. Without the ability to claw, the cat will still have its increased biting tendency compared to a cat that did not. Whether the aggressive cat bites more now that it has no claws is still hard to determine.

Myth #6: *The post-operative period involves tremendous pain.*

Pain management techniques have improved greatly in recent years and include regional nerve blocks eliminating pain completely from the feet during the first few days of healing, fentanyl pain relief patches, as well as injectable and oral medications. This means that a declawed cat should be comfortable in the recovery period.

That said, if proper pain relief is not practiced, the declawed cat will have sore feet after surgery. The larger the cat, the more discomfort there is and reluctance to bear weight.

The recovery period should not last longer than a week or so. Healing should be complete by two weeks. Pain after this recovery period is not normal or expected in any way and if a declawed cat seems to be uncomfortable or lame, a recheck appointment is definitely needed.

If you plan to declaw your cat, you may want to ask your veterinarian about the pain relief plan they expect to utilize so you know what to expect.

Myth #7: *A declawed cat will not use a litter box again.*

It is important that litter not get impacted in the declaw incisions during the recovery period. Shredded paper is the usual recommendation during recovery and some cats simply will not use shredded paper. The recycled newspaper litters are an excellent alternative. The only litter problem one might expect would be lack of acceptance of a new litter during the recovery period. Declawed cats do not lose their litter box instinct.

Declaw Methods

Three techniques are commonly used for permanent declaw surgery: the Resco or clipper blade method; the disarticulation method; and the Laser declaw.

Resco/Clipper Blade Method

This is probably the most common method used by veterinarians to declaw cats as it is associated with the fastest surgery time. It involves the use of a sterile nail trimmer to cut through the bone of the third digit of the toe. The cat loses the part of the bone from which the claw grows. The incision is either sewn closed with suture material or closed in surgical glue.

What to Expect / Possible Complications

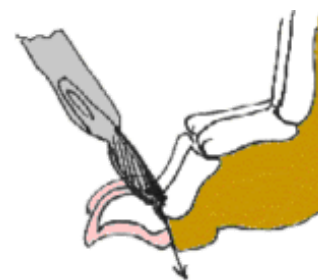
- Patients commonly spend at least one night in the hospital for bandaging, monitoring for bleeding and pain assessment.
- Some spotting of blood is normal from the toes during the first few days at home (beware if you have white carpeting).
- Shredded paper or pelleted recycled newspaper litter is recommended during the healing period. Conventional clay or sand litters can impact inside the tiny incisions and cause infections.
- Pain medication is essential, especially for larger or older cats who have more weight to carry on their tender healing toes. The amount of weight carried on the feet (the size of the cat) is the biggest factor in post-operative pain. There are numerous regimens employed for declaw pain control.
- Occasionally not enough of the third bone is removed and the claw regrows. When this occurs, infection is generally inevitable and the remaining bone must be removed. This is not a potential complication when the disarticulation method is employed.
- A study by Martell-Moran *et al* published in the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery in 2017 found that cats declawed with this method had more back pain later in life than disarticulated cats or undeclared cats.

Disarticulation Method

This procedure is a bit more difficult to master as it involves the delicate disconnection of all the tiny ligaments holding the third bone in place. The entire third bone is removed intact, whereas in the Resco method, the bone is cut through, leaving a small piece behind.

What to Expect / Possible Complications

- Because the entire third bone is removed, there is a zero possibility of the claw growing back; however, the cut ligaments allow for a subtle drop in the way the foot is held. Most owners do not notice this change in posture.
- Two nights in the hospital are required for this procedure (one night with bandages and one without).



The disarticulation method.
Graphic by MarVistaVet.

- Some spotting of blood from the toes is normal during the first few days at home (be aware of this with white carpeting).
- Shredded paper or pelleted recycled newspaper litter is recommended for 10 days after surgery. Conventional clay or sand litters can impact the tiny incisions and cause infections.
- Pain medication is a good idea, especially for larger or older cats. The amount of weight carried on the feet (the size of the cat) is the biggest factor in post-operative pain. I recommend the use of the [fentanyl patch](#) for post-op pain control as well as pre-operative local blocks to the feet for pain control.
- Occasionally not enough of the third bone is removed and the claw regrows. When this occurs, infection is generally inevitable and the remaining bone must be removed.
- If the unguis crest of the nail is not removed (the area from which the claw grows), the claw may be able to partly grow back and a second surgery will be needed.

The Laser Declaw: Another Way to Disarticulate

Recently, the laser declaw has received a great deal of attention. In this surgery, a laser rather than a scalpel blade is used to disarticulate the third toe bone. Advantages of laser surgery include virtually no bleeding during surgery or afterwards, possibly less post-operative pain, and in many cases, no bandages.

The downside is the expense of the equipment. The cost of the laser equipment itself is \$20,000 to \$40,000. To justify such an expense, the laser must be able to generate substantial revenue for the hospital. This means that the cost of the laser declaw to the pet owner is likely to exceed the price of the conventional declaw by an additional \$50 to \$150 dollars.

Tendonectomy: A Surgical Alternative to Declawing

This surgical procedure has emerged as an alternative to the bone removing declaws. Here, a tendon is cut on the underside of each toe to prevent grasping motions. The claws remain but the cat cannot extend them.

What to Expect / Possible Complications

- Because the incisions needed for this procedure are so small, the recovery is minimal. No bandages, no special litter, no blood spotting. There are usually no stitches to remove and the tiny incisions are closed in surgical glue.
- Because the cat can no longer make grasping motions, the claws will naturally grow in a circular manner into the foot pads causing pain and infection unless the owner is able to trim the nails on a regular basis. The tendonectomy patient will require life-long regular nail-clipping. This may not be practical in an aggressive cat and may not be the right choice for an owner seeking a low-maintenance pet.

- The August 1, 1998 issue of the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association reports a study to compare the long- and short-term complications of tendonectomy vs. those of traditional declaw. Owner satisfaction with both procedures was also measured. While cats who received the tendonectomy showed significantly lower pain scores immediately post operatively, both procedures showed an equal frequency of other complications (bleeding, lameness, and infection). The number of days it took for a cat to walk normally again was not different between the declawed cats and the tendonectomy cats. There was no significant difference between the percentage of owners satisfied with declaw versus the percentage of owners satisfied with tendonectomy. In a 2001 survey, more people were satisfied with the declaw over tendonectomy.

The most important thing in making a claw management decision is making a decision that you are happy with. There are positives and negatives with each procedure.

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