

# One of the Worst Things You Can Do to Your Cat

There's absolutely no benefit of this to your cat. Done solely for human convenience, owners don't often realize the potential risks to their pets, such as developing chronic pain and nerve damage, and the surgical risks of stroke, cardiac arrest and even death.

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Declawing amounts to amputation of the last bone of each toe — similar to cutting off the tip of each of your fingers at the knuckle
- Declawing is major surgery, which comes along with the risk of surgical complications, such as a reaction to anesthesia, pneumonia, bleeding, stroke, cardiac arrest, nerve damage and death
- Some cats develop chronic pain and nerve damage following declawing, along with residual inflammation and neuropathic pain
- Declawing may inflict emotional stress on cats and behavioral changes, such as aggression and inappropriate elimination, may result
- Unwanted scratching occurs less often when owners provide regular nail trims, enrichment items, safe outdoor access and positive reinforcement training

There's a reason why more U.S. states are banning cat declawing — it's dangerous for your cat, painful and often results in behavioral problems. The procedure, known as onychectomy, amounts to amputation of the last bone of each toe — similar to cutting off the tip of each of your fingers at the knuckle.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, New York became the first U.S. state to ban the practice.<sup>2</sup>

Maryland followed suit, with its ban taking effect October 1, 2022,<sup>3</sup> and Illinois has introduced legislation to make the procedure illegal.<sup>4</sup> However, many countries, including Australia, England, France, Spain and Sweden, have already outlawed declawing because it's inhumane and almost always unnecessary.<sup>5</sup>

## Top Declawing Risks to Your Cat

Declawing is major surgery, which comes along with the risk of surgical complications, such as a reaction to anesthesia, pneumonia, bleeding, stroke, cardiac arrest, nerve damage and death. Post-surgery infection is also a possibility, particularly since it affects the paws, which your cat uses to walk and use the litterbox.<sup>6</sup>

But even assuming your cat makes it through the surgery unscathed, the risks are only just beginning. The procedure is thought to be severely painful,<sup>7</sup> so it will take time for your cat to heal. But some cats develop chronic pain and nerve damage following declawing, along with residual inflammation and neuropathic pain.

Bone fragments may be left behind, causing further pain, and there's an increased risk of back pain, especially if bone fragments remain.<sup>8</sup> The pain may lead to lameness, or abnormal walking. As noted in a statement from the New York governor's press office, "After the claws are removed, cats often shift their gait and where it places most of its weight, causing strain on its leg joints and spine, which can lead to early onset arthritis and prolonged back and joint pain."<sup>9</sup>

Scarring that affects toe movement has also been reported, to the extent that additional surgery is necessary to restore proper limb function.<sup>10</sup> There's even a case of bone cancer associated with declawing, which led researchers to conclude it's a possible adverse effect of the procedure:<sup>11</sup>

*"Trauma from partial P3 amputation during onychectomy is suspected to have played a role in osteosarcoma development in this case. Malignant transformation may be considered a potential complication of onychectomy achieved by partial P3 amputation."*

Behavioral changes are also a possibility. Scratching is a normal, healthy, instinctual behavior in cats. They do this not only to stretch but to mark their territory and shed their outer nail sheath.<sup>12</sup> Declawing changes that innate behavior. While many cats still go through the motions of scratching once their claws are removed, it may not be as satisfying, possibly leading to emotional stress.<sup>13</sup>

Research published in the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery revealed that declawed cats were also more likely to bite, and those with retained bone fragments also tended to be more aggressive and engage in inappropriate elimination, behavioral issues that may be caused by lingering pain and discomfort caused by the procedure.<sup>14</sup>

## **Tips to Redirect Problem Scratching**

In one study, 58% of cat owners reported that their pet engaged in "inappropriate scratching." Fortunately, most agreed that they'd rather provide additional scratching surfaces or items for their cat to scratch on instead of surrendering them to a shelter or declawing them.<sup>15</sup>

The study found unwanted scratching was less reported by owners who provided enrichment items, safe outdoor access and positive reinforcement training, as well as who restricted access to items they did not want scratched.<sup>16</sup> A good rule of thumb to get your cat to scratch where you want her to, such as on a scratching post, is to have one more scratcher than you have cats.

So, if you have two kitties at home, a good rule of thumb is to have three scratching surfaces. Many cats don't like to share their scratching territory. Rub some organic catnip on the scratcher and praise your cat whenever she uses it.

Make sure your cat's scratching post is located in an area she enjoys being in, and offer a variety of surfaces, such as carpet- and sisal-covered posts, both horizontally and vertically aligned. Some cats also enjoy scratching on wood, fabric or cardboard.

If your kitty is scratching somewhere she shouldn't, use deterrents to make the spot less attractive, Aluminum foil, double-sided tape and even inflated balloons attached to the area may keep your cat away. You can also spray a mist of lemon essential oil in spots you want to keep your cat away from, as most do not like the scent of citrus.

You'll also want to keep your cat's nails trimmed regularly. I trim twice a month, which will minimize damage from scratching and may even make your cat scratch less often because the nails are blunt, rather than sharp.

Nail caps can also be used if all else fails, but in most cases, when you provide appropriate scratching spots, remove the temptation to scratch where they're not supposed to and keep your cat's nails trimmed, scratching won't be a problem. Remember, the goal isn't to stop your cat's scratching behavior — it's to encourage your cat to scratch in the appropriate spots.

## Sources and References

<sup>1,12</sup> [The Humane Society of the United States, Why declawing is bad for your cat](#)

<sup>2,3</sup> [NPR July 23, 2019](#)

<sup>4</sup> [NBC Chicago March 17, 2023](#)

<sup>5</sup> [PETA August 24, 2022](#)

<sup>6,10,13</sup> [PetMD March 3, 2023](#)

<sup>7,8</sup> [AVMA Literature Review July 23, 2019](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Today's Veterinary Practice July 24, 2019](#)

<sup>11</sup> [JFMS Open Rep. 2019 Jan-Jun; 5\(1\): 2055116919842394](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery May 23, 2017](#)

<sup>15,16</sup> [Animals \(Basel\). 2022 Oct; 12\(19\): 2551](#)

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