

## **This Can Emotionally Scar Your Pet for Life – Avoid at All Costs**

It's hotly debated, yet cruel and inhumane because it's linked to a lifetime of debilitating pain. Plus, it's linked to arthritis, neuralgia, and extreme emotional changes like hostility and more. If you'd never do this to yourself, please don't inflict it on your pet.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### **STORY AT-A-GLANCE**

- Declawing of cats continues to be a hotly debated topic, primarily because many people continue to believe the procedure is nothing more than a simple, painless, permanent nail trim — which couldn't be further from the truth
- A more precise name for declawing is "de-toeing." The procedure removes not only the claws, but also the bones, nerves, joint capsule, collateral ligaments and the extensor or flexor tendons
- Declawing frequently results in undesirable behavioral and emotional changes in cats that can last a lifetime. Most of these changes are pain-related
- An alternative to declawing your cat is to provide appropriate scratching surfaces around your home, and taking steps to encourage kitty to use them
- Other alternatives include regular nail trims and using deterrents to protect your floors and furnishings

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Declawing of cats continues to be a hotly debated topic in the U.S. and elsewhere. A surgery that many misinformed people continue to believe is simple, painless, and without long-term side effects, is meeting with widespread criticism from many corners.

A growing number of veterinarians, animal advocates, and pet owners view declawing as an unnecessary and cruel mutilation that can destroy a cat's quality of life.

### **Why Cats Have Claws**

Cats are digitigrades, meaning they walk on their toes. Most other mammals, including humans, walk on the soles of their feet.

Cats use their claws for balance, exercise, and stretching and toning the muscles of their legs, back, shoulders and paws. They also use them to hunt and capture prey, to escape or defend against predators, and as part of their marking behavior when they live outdoors.

Scratching is a normal behavior for your cat. It conditions and sharpens his claws, allows him to get in a good back stretch, and it's also how he marks his territory — which is why cats return to the same place again and again to do their scratching.

Since scratching is a natural instinct, if you haven't provided your cat with his own scratching surface and convinced him to use it, telling him "no" will not put a stop to the behavior.

## What Is Declawing, Exactly?

Declawing isn't a nail trim, as many people believe, or even nail removal. It's not even declawing — it's "de-toeing." The procedure removes not only the claws, but also the bones, nerves, joint capsule, collateral ligaments and the extensor or flexor tendons.

Cats have three bones in each of their toes, just as we have three bones in each of our fingers — two joints and three bones. A kitty's claw actually grows out of the last bone. This is very different from human fingernails, which grow out of flesh.

Since a cat's nail grows from the bone, it is the bone that must be amputated to prevent the claw from growing back.



The declawing procedure involves cutting between the second and third bones, and amputating the last bone that contains the claw. This severs everything in the way — nerves, tendons, and blood vessels.

A front-paw declaw requires 10 separate amputations. If the hind paws are also done, that's 8 more separate amputations. Thankfully, hind paw declawing is much less common, but also much more painful for the cat.

Declawing drastically alters the conformation of a kitty's feet, which can lead to a whole host of physical complications such as chronic small bone arthritis, degenerative joint disease, and neuralgia.

## Declawing Frequently Causes Behavioral and Emotional Changes

According to many experts, changes in behavior after declawing are due to the pain the cat is enduring. Dr. Jean Hofve, holistic veterinarian and author of **The Complete Guide to Holistic Cat Care: An Illustrated Handbook**, says about a third of cats develop a behavior problem after being declawed.

Post-declaw behaviors such as biting and urinating outside the litterbox are pain-related. In addition, the procedure changes cats' ability to walk naturally. Kitties carry 60% of their body weight on their front feet. If the front paws are injured, even temporarily, it can create compensatory injuries to the wrists, elbows, shoulders, and spine.

The weight equalizes after about 6 months according to studies, but that's weight bearing across four legs. Within the declawed paws, a cat continues to shift his weight backwards, which can lead to collapse of the wrists. Declawed cats can wind up walking on their ankles or wrists, which is painful.

If a small piece of bone is left, which is common, it can create problems as much as 15 years after a declaw. This also causes significant pain. The tendons contract when they're severed in the declawing procedure, which pulls the toes back. This changes the angle at which the foot connects with the ground, which can cause severe pain.

There are also mental and emotional problems that can develop after a declaw. Guardians of declawed cats have reported their pet has become morose, withdrawn, irritable, and even aggressive.

This is almost always the result of pain, because every step the animal takes is painful. The cat's owner may not associate the behavior change with pain because kitties are stoic, but pain is usually the cause of it.

## **No. 1 Alternative to Declawing: Provide Appropriate Scratching Surfaces for Your Cat**

Cats vary in the way they scratch and the surfaces they prefer. If you've just acquired a new kitten or adult cat, ideally you planned ahead. You set up appropriate scratching surfaces around your home, and your new feline family member is already using them.

But what if that's only what you wish you'd done (or tried without success to do), and kitty is now hard at work on the corner of your sofa or a section of your carpet?

The best thing to do is observe her scratching behavior and try to match your scratcher purchase to it. Some kitties scratch horizontally. Some reach high overhead vertically for a good backstretch. Some lie on their backs and scratch a surface above them like the filmy fabric underside of the box spring on your bed, for example.

Also observe what types of surface your cat prefers to scratch. Some cats prefer soft fabric while others like wood flooring.

If possible, buy or make cat scratchers that will satisfy both your kitty's preferred scratching position and surface. This might involve more than one scratcher design.

## **Enticing Your Cat to Use the Scratcher**

Your kitty's scratchers must be placed where they'll be used. Remember that clawing is in part a marking behavior for your cat, so she's probably returning to the same place to scratch.

It's unlikely your cat scratchers compliment the décor of your home, but unfortunately, they need to be located as close to that sofa corner or section of carpet as possible in order to entice kitty. You can also try locating one in front of the window she looks out of, her feeding area, or her litterbox.

Sticking the scratchers in out-of-the-way spots your cat doesn't frequent is unlikely to encourage her to use them.

Once you've got your scratchers in position, encourage kitty to explore the scratcher using a lure like a feather toy or a toy with some organic catnip rubbed on it. Offer praise and treats each time she uses the post and especially when she digs her claws into it.

Pet her while she's using the post, and give her plenty of positive reinforcement. The idea is to make it an appealing experience each time she uses an appropriate scratching surface.

## **Additional Alternatives to Declawing**

- Trim your cat's nails weekly or at least every couple of weeks.
- Provide at least two different scratching surfaces, including a tall, sturdy scratching post and a horizontal scratching mat.
- Protect any off-limits areas your cat is scratching. Use a combination of kitty scratching deterrents, including aluminum foil, double-sided tape, plastic sheeting, plastic carpet runners or car mats with the spiky sides up, or inflated balloons.

If you're covering surfaces you need to use frequently, like furniture, you can attach the foil, tape or plastic to pieces of cardboard and easily move them in and out of position.

- Consider using herbal sprays designed to replace your pet's paw pad scent markers on furniture or other surfaces with an odor that will discourage him from returning to that spot. I use citrus essential oils on the corners of my couch to deter scratching.
- Consider covering your cat's nails with a commercially available nail cap, which will protect both you and your belongings from kitty's sharp claws.

## **Sources and References**

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