

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

It's hotly debated, yet it's cruel and inhumane, as it's linked to a lifetime of debilitating pain — forever pain your pet can never shut down. And it's linked to emotional changes like biting and hostility. If you'd never dream of doing this to yourself, please spare your poor pet.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Declawing of cats is both a hotly debated topic and a continuing practice in the U.S., though it has been banned in other countries because it's inhumane
- Declawing is actually de-toeing, as the procedure involves amputation of the toes. It's severely painful for the cat, and can have lasting and even lifelong physical and behavioral consequences
- During declawing, it's relatively common for vets to miss tiny bone fragments that continue to grow under the skin, pressing into tissue and nerves, or through the skin
- Alternatives to declawing your cat include providing appropriate scratching surfaces, discouraging scratching of forbidden surfaces, regular nail trims, herbal deterrent sprays and nail caps
- Pet owners considering acquiring a cat should understand the potential damage claws can cause, and be committed to finding solutions that do not involve amputating kitty's toes

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published December 26, 2017.

Declawing continues to be a hotly discussed topic in the U.S., and while there's growing awareness of exactly what onychectomy involves (it's not just a permanent nail trim but mutilation of a cat's paws), kitties continue to be subjected to the procedure, and the debate rages on.

One case came from the [Facebook page](#) of a Connecticut veterinarian that featured highly disturbing photos of a spiraled nail removed from a cat who had been declawed 12 years earlier. During the onychectomy, some nail tissue was inadvertently left behind, which isn't all that unusual with declaw procedures.

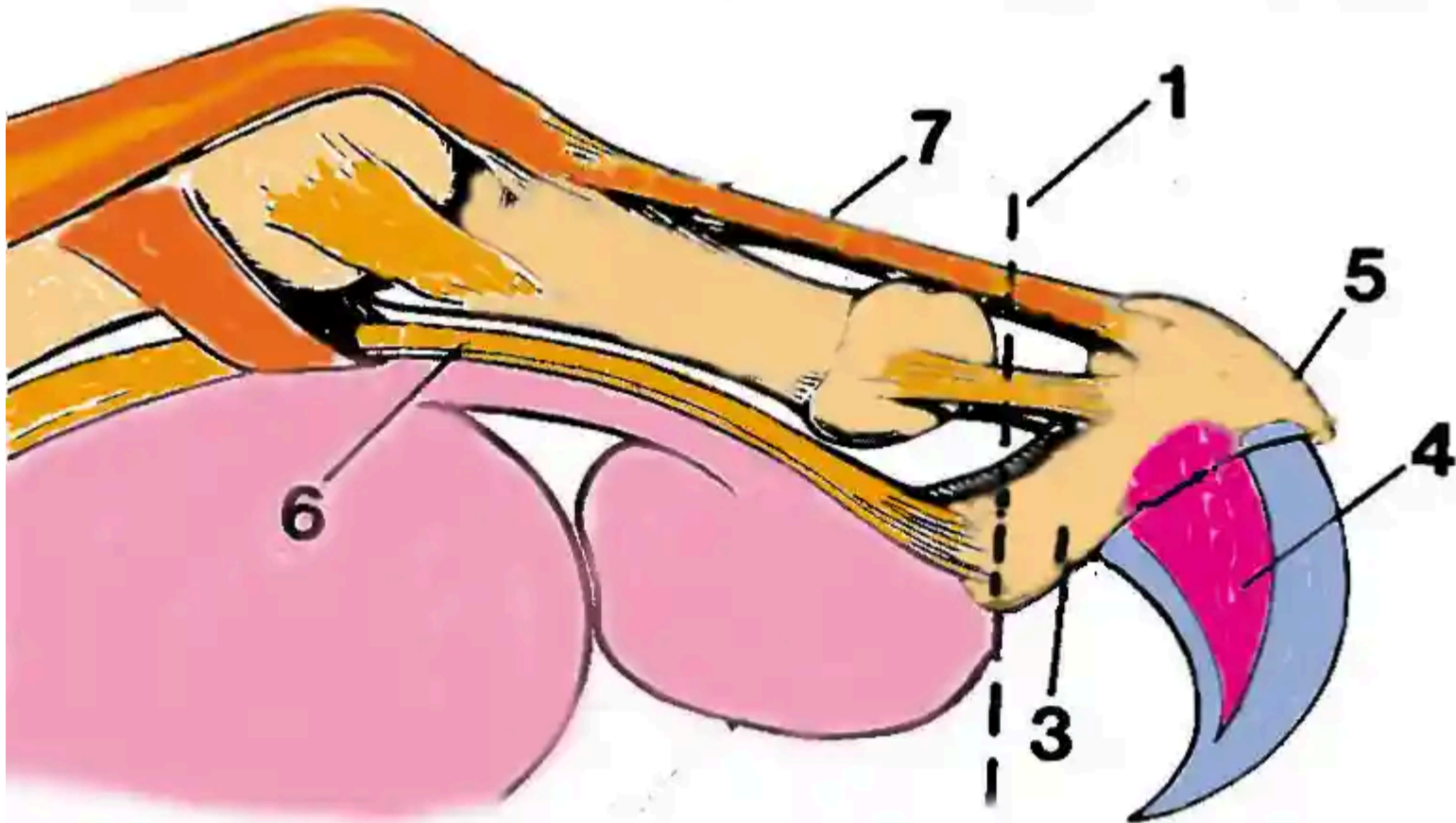
In this case, the remaining tissue formed a new nail that couldn't grow naturally, so it grew in a spiral inside the cat's leg, embedded in the flesh. It wasn't until the spiraled nail formed a mass the size of a ping pong ball and broke through the poor cat's wrist, that anyone knew there was a problem.

This is an extreme case of what can happen after a declaw procedure, but it should cause everyone who cares about cats to rethink what we're doing when we surgically "redesign" cats' feet for the sake of human convenience.

A More Accurate Name for Declawing — 'De-toeing'

Dr. Aubrey Lavizzo, a veterinarian and anti-declaw advocate practicing in Colorado has, like so many other veterinarians, performed onychectomies at the insistence of cat-owning clients. In an interview with the Denver Post, Lavizzo made the point that the procedure should really be called de-toeing, because it's not a nail trim, it's amputation of the cat's toes.

Onychectomy: "Declawing" - Feline Digital Amputation



1. Line of Amputation; 3. Third Phalanx; 4. Unguis; 5. Unguis Crest; 6. Flexor Tendon; 7. Dorsal Ligaments - are all severed and amputated in the declawing surgery. Declawing involves 10 separate and painful amputations.

Adapted from: Textbook of Small Animal Surgery 2nd ed; Slatter D; W.B. Saunders Co.

Declawing removes the claw, bones, nerves, the joint capsule, collateral ligaments and the extensor or flexor tendons. Amputation of the third phalanx or the first toe bone that houses the nail drastically alters the conformation of the feet, which can lead to a host of physical complications such as chronic small bone arthritis, degenerative joint disease and neuralgia.

*"As veterinarians, we take an oath that we will use our knowledge and skills to benefit society through the relief of pain in our animal clients," says Lavizzo. "When you talk about pain in cats, it's classified as mild, moderate and severe. Mild is a neuter. Moderate is a spay. And severe is a declaw."*¹

Because the feline claw grows right out of the bone, during declawing, it's common for veterinarians to miss a tiny piece of bone that subsequently grows back as a partial nail or bone fragment. The missed piece can continue to grow under the skin, pressing into tissue and nerves, or it can grow right through the skin.

Dr. Lavizzo studies declawed cats and keeps records of bone fragments and bone spurs left behind after declawing procedures. He believes the pain caused by those missed pieces of bone may result in behavior changes like biting and eliminating outside the litterbox.

"We always see the same thing, because it's so hard to do this procedure perfectly," Lavizzo told the Post. "You can't predict a successful outcome, and if you can't predict a successful outcome, then you shouldn't do the procedure."

It is estimated the vast majority (80%) of declawed cats have at least one complication resulting from the surgery, and over a third develop behavior problems afterward.

So Why Are Cats Still Being Declawed?

Cat owners who still favor declawing typically either don't understand what the procedure actually does to a kitty's feet, or are more concerned with being scratched or having their furniture or other belongings damaged than with the risks and pain involved in onychectomy. Many veterinarians who are still willing to perform declaws believe they're doing it to save cats who would otherwise be relinquished to shelters.

The ASPCA and the Cat Fanciers Association oppose declawing. The American Veterinary Medical Association (**AVMA**) takes the position that declawing should be considered only after attempts have been made to prevent the cat from using its claws destructively or when its clawing presents a zoonotic risk for its owner(s).

The AVMA has also published a **literature review on the welfare implications of declawing on cats**. It's important to note that the U.S. is behind the curve when it comes to banning declaws. According to a recent article in Newsweek:

"In some cities and many countries, declawing is considered so inhumane that it is illegal. Article 10 of the European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals bans declawing, along with defanging, docking ears and tails, and removing the vocal cords of a pet.

There are only a few exceptions to these rules; specifically, when a vet deems the procedures necessary to the animal's well-being. The same goes for Australia, Brazil, San Francisco and, possibly in the near future, Denver."²

Hopefully, every state in America will ban declaws for humane reasons, and that all animal advocacy groups, in particular the AVMA, will come out in full opposition to the procedure.

Alternatives to Declawing

Cats are digitigrades, meaning they walk on their toes. Most other mammals, including humans, walk on the soles of their feet. Kitties use their claws for balance, exercise and stretching and toning the muscles of their legs, back, shoulders and paws. Cats who roam outdoors (which isn't recommended) use their claws to hunt and capture prey, to escape or defend against predators, and as part of feline marking behavior.

At the risk of discouraging people from acquiring cats as pets, it's suggested that if you absolutely can't live with an animal companion who has sharp claws and scratches things with them, you might want to avoid getting a kitty. Alternatively, you can check with your local shelters and rescue groups for homeless cats that have already been declawed.

If you have or plan to adopt a kitty with claws, the humane solution to unwanted scratching is to provide sensible, appealing options for your cat. Felines have claws for a reason, and as long as they have them, they'll use them. Just as most humans need to trim their nails weekly, it may be necessary to trim your cat's nails weekly or at least every couple of weeks.

In addition to regular nail trims, it's also recommended that cat guardians provide at least two different scratching surfaces, including a tall, sturdy scratching post and a horizontal scratching mat. In addition to providing your kitty with appropriate surfaces to scratch, you must also take steps to protect any off-limits areas your cat is scratching.

Depending on what surfaces you want to protect, consider using one or a combination of kitty scratching deterrents, such as aluminum foil, double-sided tape, plastic sheeting, plastic carpet runners, car or chair mats with the spiky sides up, or inflated balloons.

There are also herbal sprays available that are 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. You can also consider covering your cat's nails with commercially available nail caps, which will help protect both you and your belongings from those sharp claws.

Now, there are some cats that no matter what you do, will continue to scratch forbidden surfaces and may damage your belongings. After all, one of the most fascinating things about having a cat around the house is you're sharing your life with a creature that will never be entirely domesticated. Bottom line: Clawing and scratching goes with the territory when you're a cat parent, and the solution should never, ever be to cut off your pet's toes.

Sources and References

¹ [The Denver Post, April 28, 2016](#)

² [Newsweek, November 9, 2017](#)
