

Declawing Cats

What is declawing?

Feline declawing is an elective procedure and not medically necessary for cats in most instances. Declawing entails the amputation of a cat's third phalanx [P3], or third 'toe bone.' Unlike human nails, cats' claws are attached to the last bone in their toes. A comparison in human terms would be cutting off a person's finger at the last joint of each finger. Because property destruction and human injury occur less commonly from the claws on the rear feet, four-paw declaws are not recommended.

It is important to understand that scratching is normal behavior for cats, which has an inherent function. The primary reason cats scratch is to maintain the necessary claw motion used in hunting and climbing, as well as to stretch their body. Scratching serves to groom the front claws and leave markers of the cat's presence. A cat's claws grow in layers and scratching removes the worn outer layer to expose the new growth inside. Cat owners should therefore provide alternatives for cats such as suitable scratchers.

When Does Declawing Make Sense for My Pet?

While declawing a cat may not be right for every situation, there are some reasons why cat owners would consider declawing. Declawing a cat can help eliminate frustrations with damaged furniture and property, when scratching posts are not enough to keep a pet from damaging internal furnishings. Some cat owners, especially owners who rent apartments, can run into concerns about having to adopt out their cat or move if their pet is causing damage to personal property. Additionally, owners who are on blood thinners (or have roommates who are on blood thinners) could consider declawing as a potential solution to concerns with a cat who is prone to scratching. While declawing typically is not the first solutions to these problems, it certainly is a tool in the toolkit that pet owners can utilize to resolve these concerns; however, pet owners should not make the decision to declaw lightly and should educate themselves on the potential risks and complications, as well as possible alternatives.

When is the best age to declaw?

Ideally, declawing should be done before a cat is 5 months old, with 4 months being the best time to declaw; cats should be at least 3lbs as well. At a younger age, there tend to be fewer complications and the patient recovers quickly. Declawing an older cat increases the likelihood of long-term complications. Before declawing a cat who is older than 6 months, we highly recommend trying alternatives and booking an appointment with your veterinarian before pursuing a surgical fix.

Alternatives to Declawing

Scratching posts/pads

Provide your cat with suitable 'scratchers' where they can exhibit normal scratching behavior. Scratchers come in multiple styles and textures. It is important to experiment

with a variety of textures and types of scratchers to determine which your cat prefers. Some examples include scratching posts or pads with sisal rope or rough fabric, cardboard boxes, and lumber or logs. Scratchers can be vertical or horizontal and there are even varieties that blend into your home decor.

The placement of scratchers is very important. Cats often stretch or scratch when they wake up so consider placing one near where your cat sleeps. It may also be effective to place a scratcher near or in front of a cat's preferred, yet undesirable, scratching object (e.g. corner of the couch). Kittens and cats can be trained to use scratchers by rewarding use of the scratcher with the cat's favorite treat. If the cat scratches elsewhere, they should be gently picked up, taken to the scratcher, and then rewarded. Cats should always be positively reinforced and never punished.

Regular claw trimming

Regularly trimming your cat's claws can prevent injury and damage to household items. Proper feline nail trimmers should be used to prevent splintering of the claws. The frequency of claw trimming will depend on your cat's lifestyle. Indoor cats, kittens, and older cats will need more regular nail trims, whereas outdoor cats may naturally wear down their nails requiring less frequent trimming. If possible, start trimming as kittens so they become comfortable with the process early on. If your cat does not like claw trimmings start slow, offer breaks, and make it a familiar routine. Ask your veterinarian for advice or a demonstration on trimming your cat's claws. Always trim claws in a calm environment and provide positive reinforcement. Proper training to scratch on appropriate surfaces, combined with nail care, can prevent damage in the home.

Temporary synthetic nail caps

These caps are glued over your cat's nails to help prevent human injury and damage to household items. The nail caps usually need to be re-applied every 4-6 weeks. At PetWOW, we are happy to apply "soft paws" to your cat's nails. We ask you leave your pet with our grooming department and our professional pet groomers will apply the paws as part of your pet's appointment.

Synthetic facial pheromone sprays/diffusers

Continued scratching by cats may be related to stress, anxiety, attention seeking, or a perceived lack of security in their environment. Anxiety can also be intensified by punishment, thus driving the cat to increase scratching behaviors in the same or other undesirable locations in the home. Consider using synthetic facial pheromone sprays and/or diffusers to help relieve anxiety or stress. Apply a synthetic pheromone spray such as Feliway® on the objects or areas in your home where your cat has exhibited undesired scratching. Do so after cleaning with soap and water to remove the communication marking scents left by your cat's paws. Applying daily comforting pheromones can prevent your cat's need to mark these areas again. Feliway® should not be sprayed on the desired scratcher. If undesirable scratching occurs in several rooms, indicating a more generalized anxiety or stress, it is recommended to also plug-in a synthetic pheromone diffuser such as Feliway® to comfort your cat in their home environment. Please speak with your veterinarian about other calming supplements or medications or further assistance is

needed to address anxiety issues.

Appropriate environmental enrichment

Providing your cat with an environment that is enriching is vital to teaching your cat to scratch on appropriate objects. Destructive scratching can occur in cats because their needs have not been fully met. Cats need the proper resources to perform their natural behaviors and have control over their social interactions. You can enhance your cat's health and well-being by ensuring all their needs are met in the home. The AAFP has a wealth of information for cat owners on environmental enrichment. Visit:

www.catvets.com/environmental-needs

Potential complications from declawing

Declawing is not a medically necessary procedure for cats in most instances. There are inherent risks and complications with this surgical procedure that increase with age. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Acute pain
- Hemorrhage/excessive bleeding
- Swelling
- Infection

Potential long-term complications include:

- Lameness
- Behavioral problems, including inappropriate urination/defecation outside of the litterbox

Less likely complications include:

- Nerve trauma
- Chronic draining tracts
- Development of palmigrade stance
- Retained P3 material leading to claw regrowth

Risk Factors for Increased Complications

There are certain risk factors that predispose cats to increased incidence of complications, namely: acute pain, hemorrhage, and long-term pain. The younger the cat, the fewer complications they tend to experience, with the ideal age for declaw being between 3 and 6 months old. Also, cats over 10 lb tend to have an especially prolonged recovery period and are more prone to arthritis and thus inappropriate elimination issues long-term.

If owners are immune compromised

While it has been suggested that declawing is acceptable to prevent spread of zoonotic (contagious from animals to humans) disease(s) to immune-compromised people, current research demonstrates the greater value of proper hygiene and parasite control in the prevention of most common zoonoses. Of note, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not

advise declawing cats owned by HIV-infected persons; rather, these individuals 'should avoid rough play with cats and situations in which scratches are likely.'¹

We are Here to Answer Your Questions

At PetWow, each of our veterinarians has a preferred method for surgical technique. If you choose to proceed with declawing your cat, please speak with the surgeon who will be performing the surgery to discuss what to expect during recovery. Please request and read our discharge instructions prior to surgery so you can ask any questions you may have before proceeding with the surgery. We want you to be satisfied with your experience, and we find that the more owners know and understand about the procedure and anticipated recovery period, the more satisfied they are with long-term results. We highly recommend scheduling an appointment with a PetWOW veterinarian to discuss whether declawing is the right decision for your pet or whether other options should first be pursued.

Adapted from the AAFP Position Statement on Declawing

¹CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5108a1.htm>