

Cats and Claws

After learning that declawing is not only a painful procedure for your cat, but also the means to removing a much needed body part for movement and defense, most cat owners opt for alternatives to declawing. The information that follows explains the declawing procedure and provides suggestions for you to use so that you can live happily with your cat, claws and all!

THE DECLAWING PROCEDURE

The standard way to declaw a cat is to remove not only the claw, but also the cells at the base of the claw, and part or all of the terminal bone of the toe. Consider it as an amputation of part of the cat's body. To better understand this, think of it as removing the last part of your finger, all the way up to the joint closest to your fingernail!

Although the surgery is done under anesthesia, after surgery most cats act as if they are in great discomfort. The cat's feet are tightly bandaged after surgery and the cat will experience throbbing. Once the bandages are removed, the feet will be painful to walk on. In addition, there is always some risk associated with anesthesia; there may be additional risks associated with infection, blood loss, or other complications.

If you are adopting and already declawed cat, it should remain indoors 100% of the time, as they have limited ability to climb to safety or to defend themselves outdoors.

ALTERNATIVES TO DECLAWING

You can keep both a cat with claws and unclawed furniture in your home! Understanding you're the needs of your cat will help you to supply the correct materials and training to make this situation possible. Remember that scratching and stretching are a natural part of being a cat. You cannot punish your cat for the natural act of scratching with his claws; however, you can provide your cat with a place to scratch that is acceptable for both you and the cat.



Claw Retracted



Claw Extended

(line indicates where declawing is performed)

Purchase a sturdy scratching post or climbing furniture, or build your own using sisal, wood and carpet scraps. Make sure the post is secure, so if the cat lunges at it with all his force, the post won't topple over.

Some people prefer to get a chunk of log for their cats to scratch on – many cats love this since it feels just like scratching on a tree! Logs can be scavenged from the woods or purchased at your local building supply store.

Again, make sure you can secure the log upright. Even if you only have one cat in your house, be sure to provide several different scratching and climbing areas.

TRAINING YOUR CAT TO SCRATCH THE POST

Cats mark their territory when they scratch; they usually release small amounts of oil or “scent” from glands located under each claw. Therefore, it is very important to teach your cat early on where he can and cannot scratch. Once an item is marked, the cat will prefer to return and scratch there again. If you train your cat to mark his scratching post and make it as inviting as possible, he will use it over and over again.

Hiding treats, hanging toys at different levels, and generously spraying catnip on the post, are terrific ways to attract your cat to the post as you frequently alternate goodies. When he scratches the post, make sure to give him a lot of praise and show excitement -- your cat will love all the attention and repeat his action.

If you're initially having problems luring him away from the furniture, there are some possible deterrents. Double-sided sticky tape placed on the corners of the furniture will discourage your cat from clawing, as will simply placing a sheet over the furniture. Cats generally don't like strong citrus smells, so if you spray orange air freshener in conjunction with using sticky tape, your cat may decide to stay away.

Making loud noises that your cat doesn't associate with you also tends to work. Sounding a personal alarm when the cat claws the couch is a great way to make them believe their action -- not yours—is triggering the noise, not you.

If you're not home to supervise, place the cat in a separate room, away from the furniture, where he cannot do any damage. It is similar to putting a child in a playpen; your cat will be safe and won't be able to destroy anything. Don't forget to leave plenty of food, water, a clean litter box, a scratching post and toys for your feline.

CLAW TRIMMING

Sharp claw tips can catch on furniture and cause it to tear. Keeping your cat's claws trimmed reduces this type of damage. Trim the claws every few weeks by using a nail clipper. Make sure that your vet or groomer gives you instructions and/or demonstration for your first time – if you cut your cat's “quick”, the pink part of the nail that has nerves and blood, you will hurt your cat and he will not want you to touch his claws again.

Most cats can learn to have their claws trimmed regularly without too much fuss, as long as you provide them with gentle handling and lots of special food treats as you trim.

Plastic nail caps, otherwise known as Soft Paws, offer yet another alternative. They fit over your cat's nails and are available through your veterinarian, online, and in select pet stores.

RECOMMENDED READING

- **Think Like a Cat: How to Raise a Well Adjusted Cat, Not a Sour Puss** – Pam Johnson Bennett
- **Starting from Scratch: How to Correct Behavior Problems in Your Adult Cat** – Pam Johnson Bennett