

Declawing: Things to Consider Before You Declaw Your Cat

Declawing a cat is a controversial issue many people consider when looking to add a feline into the family fold. Of course the advantages up front are obvious. Furniture, carpeting, household textiles, walls, doors, and yes, even humans will escape marring or hurtful scratches. However, there is a flip side to declawing which should be considered before making a decision whether or not to proceed with such a procedure.

First, one must look at the importance of claws to a cat. One obvious use of claws is defense, and a cat's claws are its first method of defense against foes (real or imagined). Less obvious to most of us are the physiological importance of claws to a cat. Cats are digitigrade, meaning they walk on their toes, not on the pads or soles of their feet. Claws provide balance and stability. They also provide a cat with the ability to stretch, exercise, and tone the muscles in its back, shoulders, legs and paws. (Picture a cat digging into a surface and pulling back against the resistance in order to stretch, similar to isometric exercises performed by humans.) Behaviorally, cats will use their claws to "mark" territory alerting other cats to the fact that they are trespassing on already claimed turf.

The surgery is called an onychectomy and is an amputation; ten separate amputations, actually. Twenty, if all four feet are to be declawed. To make the most informed decision, it is important to understand what the procedure of declawing a cat entails. Cats' claws aren't like a human's fingernails. A cat's claw is actually part of the last bone in the cat's toe. In order to remove the claw, the toe must be partially amputated, removing nerves, bones, ligaments, tendons and the joint. To put it in terms we can understand; if a human were to be declawed, the finger would be amputated at the first knuckle.

All surgical procedures carry some risk, but onychectomies carry a relatively high rate of complications compared to other surgical procedures. Those complications can include: Severe pain, infection, nerve damage, hemorrhage, bone chips (that prevent proper healing), and painful regrowth of the claw inside the paw.

The physical complications are more concrete and easily studied and documented. Less proven, more controversial, but not without merit, are the psychological and behavioral complications resulting from declawing at cat.

- Biting: Some believe cats are more likely to bite after they have been declawed because they no longer have their claws as the first line of defense.
- Personality change: Changes in personality are believed to be caused by the cat becoming withdrawn and introverted due to the shock of being declawed. Once involved and interactive with human family members, the cat may now keep to itself, perched out of reach of "predators" now that its defenses are diminished.
- Litter box issues: Perhaps one of the more easily documented behavioral concerns resulting from having a cat declawed. It is commonly thought litter

box issues begin during the recovery process when the cat may associate the pain being felt in its feet with the litter box. In some cases, avoidance or a phobia of the litter box can be long term, even permanent.

- **Marking:** As mentioned above, claws are used to mark a cat's territory. Territorial marking is an ingrained behavior in even domestic cats. Removing the ability to mark with the claws may mean the cat finds another way to mark territory. This is usually done by urinating to mark territory. This is usually thought (by humans) to be less than desirable.
- **Increased stress:** Removing a defense mechanism can increase the stress level in some cats. Increased stress levels can lower the immune system which, in turn can make the cat more susceptible to illness.

Of course, there are valid reasons to have a cat declawed, but it is important when contemplating an elective surgery for any pet, that all things be considered. There are non-surgical methods that can be employed to prevent some of the undesirable results of having a clawed cat around. There is also behavioral modification to deter or prevent some of those same undesired behaviors.

If you have decided the best option for you, your family and your cat is to proceed with the declawing surgery, make sure you express any concerns with your veterinarian. Ask him/her what can be done to facilitate your cat's recovery, pain management following surgery and during recovery, and what you can do if your cat is one of those cats who exhibits some of the physiological or behavioral hiccups of an onychectomy.