

Declawing is the surgical amputation of all or part of a cat's third phalanges (toe bones) and the attached claws. It was estimated in 1991 that 14.4 million, or 24.4% of approximately 59 million owned cats, were declawed. Most often the procedure involves the front paws only, but sometimes the claws are removed from all four paws. The surgery may be performed using sterilized nail trimmers, scalpel blades, or surgical lasers. If only part of the phalanx is removed the claw may occasionally regrow. However, it has been suggested that retaining a portion of the phalanx allows the paw to retain more of its normal function and appearance.

Many owners choose to have their cats declawed to protect their furniture or other household possessions. Scratching is a normal behavior of cats, but destructive scratching represents approximately 15 to 42% of feline behavior complaints. The act of scratching serves many purposes; it conditions the claws by removing aged cuticle, serves as a visual and scent territorial marker, provides defense from attack, and stretches the muscles of the limbs, thorax, and back. After declawing, cats continue to show the same frequency of scratching behavior.

Declawing may also be performed to protect people. Some individuals may suffer life-threatening complications from cat scratches; declawing decreases this risk while allowing the cat to remain in the home.

In some cases declawing may also be an alternative to relinquishment, outdoor housing or euthanasia. Unacceptable behaviors such as daily scratching increase the risk of relinquishment of an animal to a shelter, and declawing decreases the risk of relinquishment. As approximately 72% of cats relinquished to animal shelters are euthanized, owners may feel they are faced with the choice of declawing their pet cat or potentially condemning it to death. Because outdoor cats are exposed to predators, street traffic, inclement weather, and diseases owners may not consider keeping a scratching cat outside to be a viable alternative. Thus declawing may sometimes be necessary to ensure that a pet cat keeps its home. In addition, supporters of the procedure assert that a properly performed declaw is no less humane than spaying/neutering.

Declawing is a painful procedure, although there is debate about the degree of pain experienced under ideal or typical conditions. Clinical signs of pain following declawing include a "guarding" posture, reluctance to bear weight on the declawed limb(s), and reluctance to move. Some complications of declawing are as follows: hemorrhage, claw regrowth, wound dehiscence, paralysis, distal limb ischemia and disease. It has also been suggested that declawing is best performed on young cats because it is more emotionally traumatic for adults to be declawed. Though age-related psychological repercussions have not been reported, younger animals may experience fewer complications after surgery.

Because scratching is a normal feline behavior, opponents of the operation state that declawing causes emotional stress when the animal cannot scratch. Critics also claim that declawing adversely affects balance, climbing, and feline social interactions. It has also been stated that declawing increases undesirable behaviors, including inappropriate elimination and biting, although there is not strong enough evidence to support this. The current AVMA policy on Declawing of Domestic Cats recommends

that the procedure only be performed after exhausting other methods of controlling scratching behavior or if it has been determined that the cat's claws present a human health risk.

There are also some alternatives to declawing such as:

Behavior modification—The use of suitable attractive scratching surfaces such as dedicated posts and boards, positive reinforcement training methods, remote punishment such as a squirt bottle filled with water or a rattle, and pheromone sprays are recommended and successful methods of correcting undesired scratching behavior in cats.

Frequent claw trimming- Frequent nail trims do not alter a cat's scratching behavior, but can lessen the damage resulting from scratching.

Nail caps- As with nail trimming, covering the claws with plastic caps will not alter scratching behavior, but lessens the potential damage.⁸ The caps must be replaced every four to six weeks.⁸ Although most cats will tolerate cap placement, sedation is required in some cases; this may be undesirable for some owners due to the stress of transporting and sedating the cat.

Some commentators compare declawing to cosmetic procedures such as ear cropping and tail docking because it is typically performed primarily to benefit the owner rather than the cat. In a 1991 survey of 276 owners of declawed cats, 2% of owners were dissatisfied with the declawing procedure because they felt guilty about declawing their cats. Because of the controversy surrounding the procedure, the veterinary profession is divided. Some veterinarians vehemently oppose declawing, while others feel that the procedure is a veterinary service that can preserve and improve the human- animal bond. Many veterinarians neither encourage nor discourage declawing, but chose to inform the clients of the benefits, risks, and alternatives and allow the client to make the choice.

There is limited scientific evidence to support or refute these claims about the implications of declawing. In many of the studies involving larger numbers of cats, the procedures were performed by senior veterinary students although supervised by experienced clinicians, the impact of inexperienced surgeons on the data collected complicates its interpretation. Although owner perceptions of the procedure are important, surveys are subject to self-selection and respondent bias. Accurate determination of the long-term behavioral effects, age-related effects, and complication rates following declawing or tenectomy by experienced practitioners requires further investigation.