

Declawing of Cats: Yes or No?

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Declawing Illegalization

Several countries have banned declawing of cats, or consider it extremely inhumane and should only be performed under extreme circumstances. Denver, Colorado, the provinces of Nova Scotia and British Columbia, and eight Californian cities have passed laws making the practice of declawing illegal. VCA Canada has announced the end of declawing in its 93 clinics across the country. New York, California and New Jersey have similar bills currently working their way through their respective legislatures.

Professional Associations' Positions on Declawing

Indeed, many veterinary professional organizations also condemn or severely caution against the practice.

"The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) strongly opposes the declawing of domestic cats and supports veterinarians' efforts to educate cat owners and provide them with effective alternatives."

The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) opposes elective and non-therapeutic Partial Digital Amputation (PDA), commonly known as declawing or onychectomy, of domestic cats."

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) strongly opposes declawing (onychectomy) as an elective procedure."

World Small Animal Veterinary Association's (WSAVA) statement:

Non-therapeutic surgical operations on companion animals --

- i) Surgical operations for the purpose of modifying the appearance of a companion animal for non-therapeutic purposes should be actively discouraged.
- ii) Where possible legislation should be enacted to prohibit the performance of nontherapeutic surgical procedures for purely cosmetic purposes, in particular;
 - a. Docking of tails;
 - b. Cropping of ears;
 - c. Devocalisation;
 - d. Declawing and defanging.
- iii) Exceptions to these prohibitions should be permitted only:
 - a. If a veterinarian considers that the particular surgical procedure is necessary, either for veterinary medical reasons or where euthanasia is the only alternative to either devocalisation, declawing or defanging.

The American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA) is rather conciliatory in its position.

"The AVMA strongly encourages client education prior to consideration of onychectomy (declawing). It is the obligation of the veterinarian to provide cat owners with a complete education with regard to the normal scratching behavior of cats, the procedure itself, as well as potential risks to the patient. Onychectomy is an amputation and should be regarded as a major surgery. The decision to declaw a cat should be made by the owners in consultation with their veterinarian. Declawing of domestic cats

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should be considered only after attempts have been made to prevent the cat from using its claws destructively or when its clawing presents an above normal health risk for its owner(s).”

The AVMA Says One Thing, NIH & CDC Say Another...

Please bear in mind the last sentence in the AVMA policy. This relates to persons who may be immunocompromised from diseases such as HIV or cancer and have a greater risk of contracting Cat Scratch Disease (*Bartonella*).

The response from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to the risk of Cat Scratch Disease is: “Cats should be acquired from a known environment, have a documented health history, and be free of fleas. Stray cats and cats with flea infestation should be avoided. Declawing is not advised, but HIV-infected individuals should avoid rough play with cats and situations in which scratches are likely.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) backs up the NIH:

“Most cat scratches do not result in cat scratch disease...Avoid rough play with cats and situations in which scratches are likely. Declawing is not recommended.”

Yet, an Estimated 20% of Cats are Declawed in the U.S.

With all of these firm denouncements and bans, The Paw Project – a non-profit organization that provides education to the public about the painful and crippling effects of cat declawing, and promotes animal welfare through the abolition of the practice of declaw surgery – states that it seems 25%–43% of all cats in American homes are declawed. My holistic veterinary colleague, Dr. Jean Hofve, says a minimum of 20% of cats are declawed with estimates varying between 20-45%.

The Argument for Declawing

Why do companion cat caregivers seek out the treatment? Onychectomy (declawing) was established years ago to help caregivers preserve furniture and clothing from cat scratching destruction or due to fears of cat scratch disease. Now, veterinarians and advocates need to educate owners about how they are not only maiming the cat physically in the long term, but also affecting normal cat behavior.

Another claim is that declawed cats are less likely to be relinquished to shelters and rescue organizations. Dr. Hofve examined this claim by looking at cities that banned declawing. She compared the cities’ shelter intake numbers of cats before and after the bans took place. The aggregate data does not separate clawed and declawed cats. As a result, she found declines in relinquishments across the board. She adroitly points out the downturn could be due to a variety of efforts such as spay-neuter programs. Clearly, declawing bans did not cause an increase in shelter intake.

Why Vets Declaw

Many also wonder why veterinarians are still performing the procedure. The reasons could be: ignorance or misunderstanding about the policy changes; what they were taught to do in veterinary school; not staying abreast of the latest relevant medical research; or even monetary.

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The Act of Declawing

When your fingernail peels off at the quick and bleeds, you feel the pain for a few days and your nail grows back. That pain and recovery time is nothing compared to cat declawing. Cat declawing is more like slamming your fingers in the car door and then having to have your fingers amputated.

Cat declawing is amputation because a cat nails grow from the bone – not the skin like humans. Several onychectomy (declawing) procedures exist, but the most common techniques involve either a laser, scalpel or nail trimmer (guillotine). All three methods entail the removal of the third phalanx bone by cutting through the knuckle (joint) plus severing the tendons and nerves.

For reference, look at your index finger and bend the tip. The first bend right below your fingernail is the location cats are declawed. Now think of that same tip on your second toe and imagine if that were removed. You will still be able to walk and possibly run because humans are plantigrades – meaning that we walk on the soles of our feet. Cats, on the other hand, are digitigrades; they walk on their toes.

After being declawed, cats are forced to accommodate and walk on the soft cartilage that was previously a part of their joints. Indeed, one study found that declawed cats were three times more likely to suffer from back pain because they were forced to modify their gait due to the new weightbearing needs.

Further, Dr. Hofve backs this up by noting the difference in x-rays between clawed and declawed cats. She also notes the differences in paw pads between declawed and claw-bearing cats. Clawed cats have oval shaped paw pads whereas declawed cats have rounded and irregular shaped pads.

Additional Physical Effects of Declawing

Dr. Hofve compiled extensive documentation on the effects of declawing in her e-book [*The Cat Lover's Anti-Declawing Handbook*](#). Honestly, this article cannot do it justice. We urge everyone to read it and share it. Here is a list of the numerous complications. She goes on to describe the many signs a caregiver can observe arising from this procedure.

- Pain – acute and chronic
- Hemorrhage (bleeding)
- Lacerated paw pads
- Swelling
- Reluctance to bear weight on affected limbs
- Neuropraxia (transient motor paralysis)
- Radial nerve damage
- Lameness
- Infection
- Abscess
- Tissue necrosis
- Wound dehiscence (re-opening of surgical site)
- Incomplete healing
- Protrusion and/or necrosis of 2nd phalanx (middle finger bone) through the paw pad and skin
- Claw regrowth (known to occur up to 15 years post-declaw)

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- Scurs (growth of deformed claw segments)
- Retention of flexor process of 3rd phalanx
- Chronic draining tracts
- Self-mutilation
- Dermatitis
- Lethargy
- Carpal hyperextension (palmigrade stance, dropped carpus, walking on wrists)
- Flexor tendon contracture
- Aggression
- Cystitis (bladder infection associated with stress)
- House-soiling not associated with cystitis
- Laser burns

Why Cats Need to Scratch

According to a literature review by the [AVMA](#), cats need to scratch to:

- Condition the claws by removing aged cuticle
- Serve as a visual and scent territorial marker
- Provide defense from attack
- Stretch the muscles of the limbs, thorax, and back

Some cat caregivers may state, “Oh, my declawed cat is indoor only so territory markers are unnecessary.” Doesn’t matter. They are denying the cats’ natural, inherent instincts.

Others may say, “Cats don’t need to defend themselves indoors.” Not true. Declawed cats are four times more likely to bite people if they perceive danger. In most instances, a cat bite is medically worse than a scratch to humans.

They may also say, “My declawed cat stretches anyway.” What we must remember is that cats stretch their bodies and tone their muscles by digging their claws into something and pulling back against their own clawhold, according to [The Paw Project](#).

Recent Study of Declawed Cats

Many studies over the years have been conducted about the other behavioral and physical effects of declawing cats. The most recent [study](#) we found is from 2017.

Declawed cats:

- Seven times more likely to pee outside of the litterbox in inappropriate places like carpet
- Four times more likely to bite people
- Three times more likely to be aggressive
- Three times more likely to overgroom themselves
- Three times more likely to be diagnosed with back pain and/or chronic pain in their paws

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Alternatives to Declawing Cats

It is a myth cats cannot be trained. They can be! Albeit – it's not the same as dogs. First and foremost, you need to provide a stimulating environment for the cats. Do you have to give away your house to the cats? No. Some of our favorite, inexpensive methods to prevent scratching are:

- Scratching posts, mats, corrugated cardboard, logs, softwood boards, sisal rope
- Biweekly or regular claw-trimming
- Nail caps that are replaced every four to six weeks
- Training, training, training!