

# YOU CAN'T DECLAW WITH LOVE

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The Humane Society of Kent County encourages pet owners to seek alternatives to the declawing of their cats. If you are thinking about having your pet declawed, please take a moment to consider the following information.

Claws are important to a cat. Cats use their claws to establish footing when they are running, jumping, and climbing, and they are also a cat's best defense mechanism. If a cat were to slip outdoors, a declawed cat would be unable to defend itself, and would have a difficult time climbing a tree without its claws. Scratching is a natural behavior for cats. When a cat scratches it pulls off the outer part of the nail and exposes sharp, smooth claws. Scratching is a way for cats to mark their territory, both visually and with scent glands in their paws. Scratching also helps tone and stretch muscles.

Declawing is an elective surgery some cat owners choose to have done to prevent their pet from scratching. Because the surgery provides no medical benefit whatsoever to the cat, declawing is illegal or considered extremely inhumane in many countries outside the United States, including England, Scotland, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Slovenia, Portugal, Belgium, Spain, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand.

## The Declawing Operation

Declawing is actually an amputation of the cat's claws and part or all of the last bone of the cat's toe. It is comparable to the removal of the fingers of a human at the last knuckle – but the cat also has to walk on his fingers (Imagine having to walk on these severed appendages?)!

### **The surgery consists of the following:**

- The cat is given general anesthesia.
- The fur around the claws is cleaned and sometimes clipped.
- A tourniquet is placed around the leg to cut off blood flow during the operation.
- The claw is amputated with either a scalpel, removing the claw and the entire bone it is attached to, or with a guillotine nail cutter, which removes the nail and part of the bone it is attached to. A surgical laser can also be used to remove the nail and bone.
- The amputation site is closed either with surgical glue, or stitches, and the foot is tightly bandaged to prevent excessive bleeding. This bandage is removed in 1-3 days.
- If pain medication is used, it usually wears off in a few hours, and few cats are sent home with any pain relief.

## The Risks and Potential Complications

**Medical:** In addition to general anesthesia, which always presents a certain degree of risk to the patients health and life, infection and blood loss are possible surgical complications of declawing. An incorrectly positioned cut can remove too much of the toe, taking with it part or all of the toe pad. In addition, if the whole claw is not removed, misshapen claws can grow back, requiring additional surgery. Bandages that are wrapped too tightly after surgery can cut off circulation, causing great pain. After surgery, even normal activities, such as running, jumping or using the litter box, can cause the amputation sites to open and bleed, increasing the chances of infection. Many cats sit on their haunches, refusing to move, or limp for days to weeks afterwards to prevent putting weight on their painful feet. **The older a cat is, and the more it weighs, the more likely it is to have painful medical complications following declaw surgery.**

**Behavioral:** Although no definitive studies have been conducted on the effects of declawing, owners and veterinarians have noticed personality changes in some declawed cats. Formerly lively, friendly animals have become withdrawn and introverted. Other cats, deprived of their best defense mechanism, become nervous, fearful or aggressive. Declawed cats are also more likely to bite if they feel threatened.

## Alternatives to Declawing

- Keep your cat's nails trimmed. By keeping your cat's nails short, they do less damage if your cat does feel the need to use them.
- Provide an appropriate scratching post.
  - Place a sisal rope covered, or carpeted scratching post in a prominent location in your house (remember, your cat is also visually marking its territory when it scratches). The post should be stable enough so that it will not tip over when the cat uses it. The post should also be tall enough so that the cat can stretch itself out while scratching.
  - To teach a cat to use a scratching post, dangle a toy directly in front of the post so that the cat's nails dig into the post as he or she grabs for the toy. Be sure to praise your cat when it does use the scratching post. You can also put catnip on the post to entice your cat to use it.
  - You should also discourage your cat from clawing the wrong things. If your cat begins to scratch an inappropriate item, firmly say "NO" and move it to the scratching post. Put its front legs up on the post and make scratching motions with them. When your cat begins to scratch, be sure to praise it like crazy.
- Soft Paws are an additional humane alternative to declawing. These are available at your veterinarian's office and in some pet stores. A soft plastic cap is glued over each claw, preventing damage when the cat scratches. These generally last 6 weeks once the cat becomes accustomed to them, and can be replaced as needed.

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WORKING TO MAKE EVERY PET A WANTED PET SINCE 1883

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