

CAT DECLAWS  
TO MAIM OR NOT TO MAIM  
(DEFN: TO DEPRIVE OF THE USE OF A BODILY PART)

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Q. I have a new kitten that I'm thinking of declawing. My last cat punctured and destroyed my furniture, and I'd like to keep that from happening again. Can you go over the pros and cons of this procedure?

A. Declawing cats is a surgical procedure that has been performed for a very long time. It has become routine, is usually unquestioned and is done with our convenience (not the cats) in mind. The procedure is usually done on young kittens less than 6 months old, but it is also commonly done on adult cats. The surgery involves anesthetizing the cat, clipping the front feet, and prepping with strong disinfectant soap and solution. A tourniquet is applied to the arms above the elbow. A sterile nail trimmer is put on to each toe on a certain angle, and the entire claw with the toe tip is amputated at the joint (the first knuckle). It is roughly similar to chopping the tips of all your fingers and thumbs off above the nail, but leaving the actual fingerprint or toe pad still in place. All ten toe tips with the claws on the front feet are removed. Sometimes a caretaker requests the rear feet be done as well, but this is rarely done.

Some surgeons will suture the incisions, but the majority use surgical skin glue to close the wounds. A very tight bandage is placed on each paw the first day to reduce bleeding after recovery. The toe tips are richly supplied with sensitive nerve endings and lots of blood vessels. Believe it or not, some hospitals still do not use pain medication after the cats wake up. The majority will use the newer pain relievers to reduce the throbbing pulsating knife-like pains. Even though your kitty may be stoned, the pain is not completely gone. After one day, lighter, padded, looser bandages are reapplied, and the tight restricting ones are removed. For the first few days the hobbled and crippled cat tries to walk, and dig in the litter pan, but spends most of it's time shaking it's paws, stumbling, whining and laying over on their side, holding the front legs out like a sleepwalker.

So why do we do this barbaric thing to our cats? The main reason is that they scratch and ruin our furniture right? They also scratch us, the kids, slap the dogs eyes, and climb up the curtains. Cats like to perform the activity called kneading. It is similar to a human baker kneading dough to make bread. The cat does this behavior for the sheer joy of it. They go into a purring trance-like Zen state while they knead a blanket, a cushion, your lap, or a lamb skin bed cover. They are reliving the motions the kitten made when nursing on the mother's warm fuzzy belly. This is feel good, self-relaxing, kitty hypnosis at its finest. The only problem is that the claw tips may damage fabric or skin. The main reason to declaw cats is the major damage they can do to furniture by sharpening their claws. Cats do a top to bottom vertical or horizontal swipe with their front feet with caws

extended. They do this to remove the outer old layer that builds up on the claws, and this keeps them razor sharp. As cats age they do this activity a lot less, but during their lives they can ruin a lot of furniture.

Why are declaws done more often in kittens than adults? The human surgical procedure circumcision is done in young males because the tissue is smaller and supposedly less painful. The duration of pain is also shorter during the healing time. We can see that when this is done in adult males the misery is worse and healing time is much longer. The same applies to kittens versus adult cats. It still doesn't negate the extreme pain and misery that a kitten goes through to heal from this declaw surgery. Many adult cats are declawed when care takers get fed up with claw damage or when new adults are adopted. So, it is no secret that cats can damage things and our skin with their claws, and it is also acceptable to know that declawing is an invasive and traumatic procedure to modify a normal behavior in the domestic house cat.

What then can be done, to use a current catch phrase, "be more fair and balanced" in reacting to our pet cats claw behavior? Most cats can be trained whether young or old to tolerate a normal nail trim every two weeks. This is easily done with minimal equipment, effort, and time for the majority of cats. We are not talking about the Bad Guys that won't let you do anything but feed them, and then be subservient to their needs! Trimmed nails do little or no damage. There are also blunt claw covers called "soft paws" which can be glued over the top of the nail somewhat like a human artificial nail in a manicure. You can learn to put these covers on yourself or have your animal doctor do them for you. They are easy to apply and last for a couple of months.

One of the best things to do for your cat is to provide them with plenty of choices for scratching areas. Use shag rug and rope vertical scratching posts, and use the flat cardboard floor type scratch pads. One type of scratch post that works the very best is a real 6-8 inch diameter wood log about two to three feet long. Find them when you trim your landscape, or often found in clearcut areas, or new housing developments. You can take some or all of the bark off of it, and then fashion/attach it to a corner area in the house convenient to the cat and to you. The cat will love this natural post which is the type of scratching post that nature intended in the first place.

All of these suggestions will keep cat claw damage to a minimum.

We must also consider what happens when a declawed cat gets outside. They can still climb fences and trees, but are compromised significantly in their ability to do so. If they need to defend themselves against other dogs or cats, the loss of the front claws will again compromise their ability to defend themselves.

Finally, one of the greatest aids in the management of pain, and discomfort in pet cosmetic surgery is the use of homeopathic medicines. The type of pain that is experienced with ear crops, tail docks, and declaws is very specific for a remedy called Hypericum which is originally made from the St. John's Wort plant. If conventional veterinarians who do these procedures would use this remedy in their patients, they would reduce the suffering the pet endures by a significant amount. Non believers of these types of medicines can be convinced easily when they see the rapid gentle results, without any kind of sedation.