

Feline Scratching and Declawing

From the Veterinary Information Network General Veterinary Library, 1998

Scratching is a normal behavior that conditions the claws, serves as a visual and scent mark, and is a means of stretching. However, when scratching is directed at furniture or members of the family, it is unacceptable. In most cases scratching can be prevented with environmental and behavioral management. Inappropriate scratching can be prevented by keeping the cat away from problem areas and trimming the nails regularly, while acceptable scratching can be allowed and encouraged by providing a proper scratching post. Should the cat continue to scratch in an inappropriate area, the post could be moved to that area, and/or the scratched furniture can be covered with a less appealing material (plastic, a loosely draped piece of material). Remote punishment (e.g. water rifle) and environmental punishment (sticky tape, motion detectors, Scat Mats®) can be used to deter further scratching of an area. Some owners may want to consider plastic nail coverings (Soft Paws®) which can be glued over the claws monthly. The AAHA pamphlet on destructive cats or the client handout that can be printed from the Information by Prescription Lifelearn diskette on behavior provide owners with information on scratching post training and declawing. (See behavior resource list for details).

For those owners with destructive cats who cannot train them to use a scratching post, declawing and digital flexor tendinectomies are other options. Although the tendinectomy is a less invasive procedure, it is not a practical option unless the owners are willing and capable of caring for the nails (i.e. trimming) which will continue to grow (and no longer able to be shed and conditioned by scratching). The primary reasons for declawing are property damage or the risk of injury to people or other pets.^{1,2} Occasionally, the welfare of a family member may be best protected by declawing the family cat (e.g. humans with compromised immune status due to HIV, immunosuppressive therapy, etc.). Declawing allows the family to keep the cat and enjoy the rewards of pet ownership. Declawing means that fewer cats need to be rehomed or destroyed and that more cats can be placed.

In numerous studies to date, declawing has been shown to cause no increase in behavior problems.^{1,2,3,4,5,6} In fact, many cats continue to scratch furniture after declawing, but caused no significant damage. In a study of over 850 cats, declawed cats were no more likely to bite, than clawed cats.⁴ In a study of 276 cat owners, declawing successfully met or surpassed the owner's expectations in all cases.¹ There was 96% owner satisfaction at the time of the study (up from 81% prior to surgery) and over 70% of cat owners indicated that there was an improvement in the cat-owner relationship.¹ In a study of veterinarians in Ontario, it was estimated that over 50% of owners of declawed cats would not have owned or kept their cats, had they not been declawed.² This is consistent with studies that have examined the factors associated with the reasons for surrendering a cat to an animal shelter, in which behavior problems (including scratching) were a major reason for surrender,⁷ while being declawed decreased the risk of relinquishment.⁶

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