

Declawing Your Cat

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
October 2014

Is the procedure a good idea or a form of painful mutilation?



Strong opinions abound on both sides of the cat declawing controversy.

While still largely considered a legal veterinary practice here in the United States, many nations have enacted laws banning or restricting declawing, including the U.K., Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Estonia, Australia, Israel, Brazil, Japan, and Turkey. There does exist a handful of local communities on our soil that have legislated against it; California leads the way, with West Hollywood, Los Angeles, Burbank, Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, Culver City, Berkeley, and San Francisco banning declawing.

Major animal advocate groups have taken various stances against declawing, from simply discouraging its practice to considering it cruel and unethical. On its website, the Humane Society of the United States “opposes declawing except for rare cases when it is necessary for medical purposes.” The official position of the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) states it “is strongly opposed to declawing cats for the convenience of their guardians.” PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) is never one to mince words, calling declawing “a violent, invasive, painful, and unnecessary mutilation.”

Even within the U.S. veterinarian community it’s a debated topic, and many animal hospitals refuse to offer the surgery. Beginning in 2006, under the USDA’s Animal Welfare Act, declawing wild and exotic big cats, including tigers and lions, as well as other carnivores such as bears, is no longer allowed; yet an estimated 25 percent of all domestic cats in this country have legally

Declawing Your Cat

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
October 2014

undergone this surgery with licensed vets.

Scratching, as we all know, is a natural behavior in felines. Cats scratch for many reasons. It's their primary means of self-defense. Used offensively, claws snare small prey like garden birds, lizards, and mice. Territory is marked and claimed through scratching, as scent glands are located in the paws. Loose nail husks are removed during this activity, and essential muscle stretching of the front quarters is also achieved.

Perhaps most important to cats, scratching is pleasurable. While considered normal, destructive scratching of household furniture is the overwhelming reason that cat owners opt to declaw. Cats certainly can do a number on molding, armrests, and carpeting. Understandably, this destruction is sometimes a deal breaker between the pet and its human, often coming down to either declaw or find McMeow a new home.

Medically speaking, the technical term for declawing is *onychectomy*. Far from being a simple snipping of the nails, it's the surgical removal of front-paw claws by amputation of all ten end bones of the toes. Back paw knuckles can be removed as well, but are usually left intact.

Post-surgical effects can sometimes include lingering paw pain, lameness, atrophy of front leg muscles, nerve damage, bone spurs, joint stiffness, arthritis in leg joints and spine, and lack of balance. Ironically, the amputation to ward off unwanted behavior can occasionally cause other bad behaviors to develop. Increased biting has been observed when the cat's basic defense is eliminated, and paw pain can set off total avoidance of the litter box in some animals.

No matter where a cat owner stands on the declawing opinion spectrum, it's an undisputed fact that the procedure is an irreversible amputation. That's why it's sensible to take a conservative approach to solving scratching problems before considering the big-guns approach of declawing.

There are several effective nonsurgical alternatives. Routine nail trimming with metal clippers will keep the claws short and dulled to minimize destruction. Vinyl nail caps are now available on the market, which are glued on, but need replacing every six weeks.

Declawing Your Cat

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
October 2014

Most important for prevention is the provision of ample “good scratch” zones in the home to redirect normal behavior to designated areas where scratching is allowed. Sisal fabric posts and corrugated cardboard scratch boards are excellent targets that are easily erected throughout the home. The vertical and horizontal posts should be longer than the cat fully stretched, stable (cats avoid wobbly posts like the plague), and made with shreddable material.

A few years back I accidentally discovered the perfect cat-scratch attracter when I rolled up a carpet in my living room. My kitties loved to have at it on the rough reverse side of the carpet, and it has become the preferred go-to spot for morning stretches. Placing posts in high-traffic family areas satisfies the cat’s territorial and social urges.

One alternative can be found in our animal shelters. These facilities house cats in need of forever homes, and a handful of these adopt-hopefuls are already declawed by previous owners. According to executive director Laurie Hoffman, as of early September, three percent of adoptable cats through the Humane Society of Greater Miami are declawed. Why get a cat and go through surgery when there are available pets guaranteed to not make fringe of the sofa?

Janet Goodman is a Miami Shores-based dog trainer, animal-talent wrangler, and principal of Good Dog Bad Dog Inc. Contact her at info@gooddogbaddogmiami.com.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com