

Declawing: The Price of Convenience

By Judah Battista

The declawing of cats is still routinely performed in this country, even though it is illegal or considered inhumane in many other countries around the world. Most people decide to have their cats declawed as a matter of convenience to protect their furniture from cat scratching or to guard against injury to themselves and family members.



Many of these people, however, don't realize the pain that the surgery can cause. Declawing is the amputation of each toe at the first joint. In humans, it would be equivalent to cutting off the tip of every finger at the first knuckle – very painful, indeed! If performed on a human, this operation would be considered a mutilation. It is as unethical as tail docking and ear clipping in dogs.

People who declaw their cats also may not be aware that the surgery can cause more problems than it solves. Cats deprived of their front claws may develop an aversion to the litter box. Their paws remain sensitive from the surgery, so they avoid scratching in their litter and may begin eliminating around the house instead.

Declawing leaves cats without one of their primary defense mechanisms, and impairs their balance and ability to climb. Many declawed cats suffer from joint stiffness. In certain cats, it may leave psychological scars that translate into behavioral problems.

Declawing is essentially done for the convenience of humans – to the detriment of the cat. You are working against rather than with your kitty if you force him to endure needless pain and put him at risk for developing negative side-effects to the surgery.

If you want to protect your furniture, there are humane alternatives to declawing. Cats scratch things for various reasons – to slough off the husks of dead claws, to mark their territory, and to stretch their bodies. It's a completely natural behavior, so give your cat an alternative place to scratch – a scratching post. You can encourage your kitty to use the scratching post by rubbing or spraying it with catnip. There are many different kinds of scratching posts (both vertical and horizontal), so you might want to try several different kinds to find the one your cat prefers.

There are also several different products available at pet supply stores to discourage your cat from scratching the furniture. You can apply clear, sticky strips called Sticky Paws to your furniture or spray the furniture with a smell (like citrus) that cats don't like. Other things that might help: Keep your cat's claws trimmed or apply soft plastic caps (called Soft Paws) to your cat's claws. And, if all else fails, a simple stream of water from a spray bottle often gets the point across!

If you would like more information about declawing and alternatives to it, these two web pages are very helpful: The Paw Project at www.pawproject.com/html/faqs.asp and the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights at www.avar.org (search for “declawing”).

For over 10 years, Judah Battista has been supervisor of the clinic at Best Friends and co-manager of Best Friends' Cat World, which houses around 600 cats.