

No More Homeless Pets Forum

Date: October 31 – November 4, 2005

Topic: What's Wrong with Declawing?



Does it keep cats in homes? Is laser declawing more humane? What if a landlord requires it, or if there are small children – or previously declawed cats – in the home? Dr. Jennifer Conrad arms us with teeth and “claws” to answer these “prickly” questions.

Introduction by Dr. Jennifer Conrad

The Paw Project's mission is to educate the public about the painful and crippling effects of feline declawing, to promote animal welfare through the abolition of the practice of declaw surgery, and to rehabilitate big cats that have been declawed.

Many people, including animal lovers, do not realize that declawing is a surgical procedure in which the animal's toes are amputated at the last joint. A portion of the bone, not just the nail, is removed. Declawing may result in permanent lameness, arthritis, and other long-term complications. The practice, although common in the United States, is rarely performed in the rest of the civilized world. It is actually illegal in many countries. Great Britain's Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons goes so far as to declare declawing “unnecessary mutilation.”

Domestic cats are declawed by pet owners who give the reason that they wish to protect their household furniture. They are seldom fully informed of the potential consequences of declawing by their veterinarians. Behavior problems in declawed house cats, such as biting and litter box avoidance, are not uncommon. The unfortunate feline victims are frequently relinquished to the “pound.” With poor prospects of finding understanding new owners, these animals are usually destroyed. Let's talk about what we can do to help the cats, big or small.

Bio for Dr. Jennifer Conrad

Dr. Conrad has nearly two decades of experience caring for wildlife on five continents. She is an impassioned advocate for animal welfare. She has witnessed the suffering and exploitation of animals, destruction of habitat, and gratuitous hunting that threaten the welfare and the very survival of many species.

Dr. Conrad has participated in many programs to protect and improve the lives of wild animals. She has traveled to Namibia to de-horn rhinos, making them unattractive targets for slaughter by poachers who prize the horns for ornamental uses. While in Africa, she worked with the Cheetah Conservation Fund, collecting information to help fortify the dwindling numbers of this species. In Nepal, Dr. Conrad treated endangered Asian elephants, and in the Galapagos Islands, she joined government scientists treating a threatened population of sea lions. Dr. Conrad is a graduate of the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine and is a member of the American Veterinary Medicine Association and the American Association of Zoo Veterinarians.

Currently, Dr. Conrad's professional responsibilities are divided between nonprofit wildlife sanctuaries for unwanted and abused animals in southern California and her own company, Vet to the (Real) Stars, which provides humane veterinary care to animals appearing in television and movies, including *Doctor Dolittle 2* and the recent remake of *Planet of the Apes*.

In her former role as head veterinarian at a wildlife sanctuary, she founded the Paw Project, which rehabilitates big cats, such as lions, tigers, cougars, and jaguars, maimed by declawing. Actually a partial amputation of the last bone in the cat's toe, declawing often cripples these magnificent creatures, both from the pain caused by the bone fragments left behind, and from the progressively debilitating arthritis produced by abnormal stress on other joints as the cats try to avoid walking on their tender toes.

Does declawing keep cats in homes?

Question from Crystal: I'm very much against declawing, but think that it's definitely preferable to euthanasia. Does declawing keep cats in their homes? Is it ever OK for someone to declaw as a last resort? And if not, what can be done to keep cats in their homes? I believe there are just too many cats in shelters and/or facing euthanasia, and if the choice is between declawing or the cat being surrendered to a shelter or put to sleep, I'm afraid I'd choose the lesser of two evils, much as I hate declawing.

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: Certainly, we all want to prevent the unnecessary deaths of companion animals and ensure that they have loving homes. It is an unfortunate fact that a few people don't tolerate a cat's natural need to scratch. Before we condone declawing the cat in these cases, we need to answer the question, "Does declawing really save lives?"

My understanding of the facts says that declawing does not save lives. Here is why: There is compelling scientific evidence that the net effect of declawing is that cats are at a higher risk of relinquishment and euthanasia because of the behavioral and physical problems that can result from declawing. The behavioral problems most often associated with declawing, litter box avoidance and aggression, are much less tolerated than unwanted scratching and much more likely to land the cat in the pound.

Why are declawed cats at such a high risk of relinquishment? People who declaw their cats typically cite protection of their furnishings or avoidance of bodily injury as the main reasons for having a cat declawed. However, they may not realize that the pain and complications from the surgery can cause behavioral problems that are even worse than the scratching problem for which the cat's toes were amputated. A declawed cat can still bite a child and may become more likely to do so if she has no claws. A cat whose paws hurt when scratching in a litter box may avoid the litter box altogether, and might even choose the expensive couch as the new toilet.

In a 1996 JAVMA article, Gary Patronek, VMD, PhD, using multivariate statistical analysis, found that declawed cats were at an increased risk of relinquishment to animal shelters when compared to their clawed counterparts. His study also showed that among relinquished cats, 52.4% of declawed cats were reported to exhibit litter box avoidance, compared to 29.1% of non-declawed cats. These behavior problems that arose from declawing ultimately lead to the demise of declawed cats.

The truth is this: Declawing and euthanasia is not a simple either/or proposition. In many cases, rather than either declawing or euthanasia, declawing leads to euthanasia.

People with cats need to know the risks and alternatives to declawing and veterinarians must take an active role in offering and assisting with the alternatives, despite their own financial interest in declawing. (Some veterinarians are making as much as \$1,200 per hour declawing cats.) As veterinarian Nicholas Dodman, board-certified animal behaviorist and professor at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, says, "There are very few people [who would consider euthanizing a cat if it could not be declawed] ... who could not be re-educated by an enthusiastic and well-informed veterinarian as to the inhumanity of this approach."

The real risk of cats being relinquished to pounds if the owner cannot declaw the animal has typically been grossly overstated by the American veterinary profession. (European veterinarians consider declawing "unnecessary mutilation," and do not have higher rates of relinquishment than Americans do for their animals.)

In a survey of owners of cats that had been declawed and their veterinarians, reported by Dr. Gary Landsberg in *Veterinary Forum*, September 1994, only 4% of the owners said they would have relinquished their animals had they not been declawed. In contrast, the veterinarians surveyed in the same article rationalized performing the surgery by speculating that 50% of the owners would have relinquished their animals.

Alternatives to declawing exist. For those 4% who really can't live with a cat who claws furniture, there are many other options:

1. Regular nail trims.
2. Appropriate scratching surfaces, especially ones that the cat approves of. If the cat likes to scratch on wood, get a wood and sisal scratching post; if the cat prefers carpet, get carpet posts. Corrugated cardboard will most likely not disappoint the cat and is inexpensive to provide. Train the cats to use them.
3. Soft Paws are vinyl sheaths for the nails.
4. Double-sided tape will protect furniture.
5. Cat-Around scratchers will fit on corners of couches.
6. Re-home the cat before mutilating it. If you can't stand claws, get a stuffed animal ... or a snake.

The Catch-22 of discouraging declawing

Question from Rachelle: At the shelter where I volunteer, the people who adopt a cat are required to sign a paper stating that they will not have the cat declawed (among other things, such as keeping the cat indoors, providing medical care, etc.). We educate them about why cats should not be declawed before they sign it.

The problem we have encountered with that is that sometimes after we have explained that cats who are declawed are more likely to have litter box problems or to bite, then the people pass over cats who were already declawed when they entered the shelter, even though we tell them that the particular cat has done very well and has not shown any problems while with us. How do we bridge this gap? We don't want to scare people away from the cats who are already declawed, but we don't want our clawed cats being declawed.

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: Your statistics show that declawed cats are certainly not guaranteed a home, which was the topic of question #1.

Perhaps you can network among your local shelters and veterinarians and let people know of the declawed cats who are available. These unfortunate animals might serve as the best choice for those 4% of people who cannot live with claws on their cats and also protect other cats from the unnecessary surgery.

All you can do is simply tell potential adopters the facts. Not every cat who has been declawed is going to have obvious behavioral problems, just as every child who runs with scissors is not going to put his eye out. It still doesn't make it a good idea. It's an unnecessary risk.

Many declawed cats do have behavior problems because of the surgery. I find that some of these cats just need a little extra attention and then they are wonderful, loyal and grateful companions. For instance, if the declawed cat doesn't want to dig in the kitty litter, maybe he/she would like ripped-up paper towels instead.

The cat might bite because of fear. A bit of empathy and training can teach both the adopter and the adoptee how to handle this problem. The new potential adopter should be encouraged with the idea of trial and error in order to save this victim. The adopter of such a cat is really, truly saving a life and if he/she is willing to work out the problems, the benefit of saving this poor little victim will far outweigh the period of inconvenience.

My vet said laser surgery was better

Question from Chastity: My vet loves my cat. He calls her "Baby" every time I bring my cat to see him. Why would a vet declaw a cat if it wasn't good for my cat? My vet told me declawing wouldn't hurt her because he uses laser surgery. He said he would only take off such a little bit that she wouldn't even miss it.

After being declawed, she is very shy now and doesn't like to be held like she used to. Sometimes she'll even bite when she never did before. My vet said this has nothing to do with her being declawed, but her personality changed after the surgery. Do you think it's because of declawing?

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: I am sure that you love your cat, and would never do anything to harm her, but I believe that your veterinarian and his patients might benefit from his rethinking his position on declawing.

Here are the plain facts that show that laser declawing is not less painful to cats:

A study reported in the September 1, 2002, issue of the *Journal of the American Veterinary Association* by Mison et al. found that lasers offered no benefit over the more conventional methods of declawing, stating "differences in discomfort and complications between groups treated via scalpel versus CO2 laser were not clinically relevant."

J. Levy et al. ("Evaluation of laser onychectomy in the cat," in Proceedings, 19th Annual Meeting, Soc Laser Med 1999;73) compared laser and blade onychectomy (declawing). Forty cats were randomly assigned to the following groups: no anesthesia (control), bandaged and anesthetized (control), blade onychectomy, or laser onychectomy.

Complications, behavioral changes, plasma cortisol concentration, and urine cortisol-to-creatinine ratios were evaluated up to 48 hours after surgery.

Complications (bleeding, limping, swelling, infection) were generally worse in the laser onychectomy group in the first two days after surgery but were equivalent thereafter. Negative behavioral changes were more pronounced in the blade onychectomy group for two days, with less play and willingness to use the paws. Blood and urine cortisol concentrations were increased to a greater degree in the blade onychectomy group for 24 hours, compared with the other groups.

In regard to the other parts of your question, while I am sure your veterinarian loves your cat, there are some veterinarians who might call an animal "Baby" not only out of love, but also because they don't remember the animal's gender or name.

Ask your veterinarian if he has read this article: "Mastery or Mockery: A Treatment Strategy for Chronic Declaw Pain" by Dr. James Gaynor, International Veterinary Academy of Pain Management newsletter, May 2005. It describes a chronic pain syndrome that results from declawing and discusses the behavioral problems, such as aggression, that are typical of cats suffering from this complication of declawing. The article can be downloaded here:

<http://www.cvmb.colostate.edu/ivapm/professionals/members/newsletters/IVAPM%20May%202005.pdf>

Maybe your veterinarian and you can do some simple tests and place your cat on pain-relief medications, as is suggested in the article. This might curb some of the behavior changes you have noticed.

Influencing vets to not offer declaw surgeries

Question from Jasmin: I'm very much against declawing and consider it a crime against the cat. In this day and age, I just can't understand why people would want to even consider it. So many people still don't know about the dangers and complications of declawing. How can we get veterinarians to stop offering declawing with spay/neuter of cats? There still are way too many veterinarians who offer this on a routine basis.

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: I think there are a few things that can be done to help persuade veterinarians not to offer declawing.

Economic incentive will drive some veterinarians. Only bring your animals to veterinarians who don't declaw cats. Make it well known in your community that only a

compassionate veterinarian would choose not to declaw, and that only a compassionate veterinarian is allowed to touch your animals. Tell your former veterinarians that you will not be going to their offices anymore because they declaw cats.

Explain to veterinarians that if they declaw the cat, they might lose the patient and client forever when the cat has surgical and behavioral complications. However, if they don't declaw the cat, they will have the patient for years.

Explain to veterinarians that according to the American Veterinary Medical Association, declawing is only supposed to be used as a "last resort." This is a whole other battle and is described in a question earlier in the week, but what it means is that all other humane options have been exhausted. Why are veterinarians declawing a 20-week-old kitten, a mere baby, who hasn't had a chance to learn where appropriate scratching surfaces are? Why aren't they offering alternatives instead of the expedient and unnecessary surgery? Be armed with the knowledge that a declawed cat is more likely to go to the pound than a clawed cat.

Ask these veterinarians if they are fully disclosing what declawing is and the potential for problems. Are they explaining the fact that declawing the cat could make her stop using the litter box or start biting? Are they offering other ways to avert scratching problems?

Teach children about declawing. Get local groups like Girl Scouts to have a cat appreciation day. Have them draw pictures and write letters to veterinarians begging them to stop declawing because it is hurting cats. Ask your city council to publicly condemn declawing of cats.

Declawing is a surgical treatment for a behavior problem. In human medicine, that notion went out with lobotomy!

There is a list of veterinarians and clinics, by state, who refuse to declaw cats. Please see <http://declaw.com/>. We can all help this effort by clicking on the option to submit the names and contact info of vets/clinics in our area who won't declaw.

Tendonectomy as an alternative

Questions from Bob and Karen: What do you think of tendonectomy as an alternative to declawing? And is there any procedure done with a laser where it can trim the nail blunt and it doesn't grow back?

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: Tendonectomy (also known as tendonotomy or tenectomy) is definitely not the solution. This surgery involves severing the tendons in each toe, rendering each toe useless to the cat. The nonfunctioning toes' nails may grow abnormally long because they cannot be honed by the cat on a scratching post. These nails can grow into the pads of the cat's paws, causing pain and infection. They can also become snagged on fabrics or the carpet, causing injury and even fracture of the toe or foot.

Even the American Veterinary Medical Association has specifically condemned tendonectomy in their position statement on declawing! (See <http://www.avma.org/onlnews/javma/apr03/030415c.asp>)

Lasers cannot blunt nails. As long as the germinal tissue from which the claw develops remains, the claw will always continue growing.

Methods of declawing cats by cauterizing the nail-forming tissue have met with poor results. Unlike humans, where the nail grows from germinal tissue just under the skin, a cat's germinal tissue is an integral part of the bone. So, in order to stop nail growth, a veterinarian must remove the bone. This is why declawing is an amputation.

I have had many big cat patients who have suffered from someone trying to declaw them without removing the bone. One African lion had nail regrowth on every toe and severe bone infections from where the veterinarian used the laser on the nail germinal tissue. The result was burnt and damaged bone that ultimately required removal anyway.

There are humane ways of blunting a cat's nails, but they're not surgical. Simply trimming the nails with clippers every one to two weeks is all that is necessary.

What if cat claws hurt someone?

Question from Leo: My 74-year-old mother lives alone and recently adopted two kittens for companionship. Her vet recommended that she have the cats declawed next month when they are scheduled to be spayed. My mother told me that the vet's reason was that Mom is a diabetic and a cat scratch could be a serious health risk.

I thought that was a bit odd and asked my own M.D. about it. She said she did NOT think declawing was necessary for diabetics ... or even for hemophiliacs (and she also made a comment about the vet practicing human medicine without a license!). Who is right? Is Mom at risk having the cats?

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: Your mom has a lot to gain by having cats in the house. There is research that says that people with animals have longer and more fulfilling lives. The benefits far outweigh the risks.

There is no need to declaw the cats. Many infectious disease physicians don't recommend it. Declawed cats are often biters and a bite wound is a sure way to get your mother into an emergency room. Scratches are not so pernicious. (Cat scratch fever, an uncommon and treatable disease, seems also to be linked to other modes of transmission, like bite wounds and fleas.)

To protect her skin, your mother just has to practice common sense with the cats. Routine nail trimming and good scratching posts are a good start. I recommend that your mother begin by training the cats to accept nail trims. She should reward them with treats and praise after they allow her to trim their nails. This way, when they are all older, it won't be hard on any of them.

Legislation to protect the cats

Question from Kendon: Why not take it to the next level and prohibit declawing with legislation? I'm told that declawing is illegal in the U.K.

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: It would be great to make legislation to outlaw declawing in the U.S. Declawing is illegal or considered unnecessary mutilation in much of the world.

Here is where we are on that issue of bringing America up to speed: In 2003, the Paw Project was able to pass the very first anti-declawing ordinance in all of North America. The tiny city of West Hollywood, California, unanimously voted to outlaw the procedure in April of that year. Now, two years later, the California Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA.net), a trade organization that protects the profits of its member veterinarians, is suing the city of West Hollywood to get the right to declaw cats back. The CVMA says that the city cannot ban a veterinary procedure. The city hasn't. Cats in West Hollywood can have a toe amputated if it is in the best interest of the cat, like if there is cancer in the bone of that toe. They cannot be declawed if it is for the convenience of the guardian, to protect a couch. The battle has held up a lot of other cities from banning the procedure, as they are waiting for the outcome.

However, San Francisco, Berkeley and Malibu have all passed citywide resolutions that condemn the practice of declawing. This does not mean it is illegal in those cities, only that the city council recognizes that it is an inhumane procedure.

The Paw Project worked tirelessly with state assembly member Paul Koretz for years. Finally, the State of California passed a law in 2004, signed by Governor Schwarzenegger, that has made it illegal to declaw the big cats. The original bill covered all cats, but was fought by the veterinary associations so vehemently that it was amended.

If you are interested in making declawing illegal in your city, please go to www.PawProject.org for more information.

Education materials make the case against declawing

Question from Susan: Do you know of any flyers or posters available that persuade people not to declaw cats? I would sure like to see a comparison done showing human hands that had fingers amputated at the first joint (by special effects). I think if people thought in terms of their own skeletons being mutilated, they would be more considerate of the cats.

Are there any laws that you know of that require veterinarians to disclose what declawing actually is to clients who request it? I have a friend who had her three cats declawed, after her doctor told her she caught cat scratch fever from them. Her vet did not tell her what declawing was, and she was horrified when she did find out. Also, one of the three developed litter box avoidance and was given up, and another is "nippy," presumably to show she still has teeth to use.

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: I agree with you wholeheartedly. I wish veterinarians would fulfill their professional and ethical obligations to disclose what declawing is. Then, if clients still want to declaw their cats, I wish that the veterinarian would refuse to perform mutilating surgery and help to find new homes for the cats instead.

There are some pretty explicit websites out there that depict declawing and its effects. Check these out, if you can stomach them:

<http://www.stopdeclaw.com/> (very graphic)

<http://www.declawhallofshame.com/> (funny and somewhat graphic)

<http://www.de-clawing.com/> (mild)

<http://www.pawproject.org/>

Unfortunately, veterinarians who perform declaw surgery have a conflict of interest over declawing: The cat or the money? If they were to truly disclose the truth about the surgery (that declawing is an amputation and one of the most painful, routinely performed surgeries in veterinary medicine, and that there is a likelihood of chronic pain syndrome and even phantom pain for these beloved cats), they might not get their \$250 to \$400 for declawing the animal – because few people would knowingly want to harm their cats.

To be fair, even vets who don't actively promote declawing are afraid that if they don't do what their client wants, they will lose the client and lose that business.

If vets were to mention that declawed cats may develop behavior problems like litter box avoidance and increased biting, or if vets were to train clients to deal with unwanted scratching with behavioral modification, the demand for declawing would likely go down dramatically.

In the U.S., there are no laws dictating that a veterinarian must fully disclose the truth about this horrible surgery and, although standards of professional ethics demand that they do, it is rarely discussed. The problem is that the veterinary associations fight most ordinances that protect animals. That is hard to believe, but true. Look who condones sow gestation crates and foie gras production – veterinarians. (See http://www.avma.org/advocacy/state/policies.asp#animal_welfare)

The only way that I see animals being protected from this unnecessary mutilation is through a grassroots movement to educate the public so that people like your friend will not be deceived. (By the way, your friend should give her veterinarian a stern lecture on the patient/doctor bond. The vet was also practicing human medicine without a license – any educated vet should know that cat scratch fever can just as easily come from a cat bite, and there is a growing body of evidence that transmission is commonly accomplished by a flea bite.)

I believe that we can stop declawing in the U.S. and Canada in our lifetimes. I believe the most effective way is through children and through television. The Paw Project spends as much time as possible teaching children about declawing. Children are militant about protecting animals from harm, and there is hope that this will influence their parents. At the very least, we will have a new generation of Americans who won't declaw their cats.

The Paw Project, in conjunction with Kaleo Productions, is working on a documentary called "Maimed: The Harmful Effects of Declawing." There is a lot of interest in this film from television channels all around the world, and if all goes well, it will air regularly in the U.S. as well. For more information, contact me at <http://www.pawproject.org>.

But, my declawed cats do fine!

Question from Jenn: It's very frustrating for me to observe all the bad things people say about declawed cats. My two cats are declawed and they have never had any adverse reaction from the surgery and live happy, carefree lives!

I understand that surgeries can be done bad or wrong. I understand that post-op care can be done bad or wrong. I also know that many people will declaw their outside cat and then bring it in – without “showing” it how to be happy and content indoors. I believe that these things – although they can be encountered with ANY surgery – are the things some associate with declawing alone. I think that, doubled with the fact that declawing is a cosmetic surgery, is what turns people anti-declawing.

I guess my question is: Is declawing by nature so much worse than ear clipping, dewclaw removal or tail docking that it needs to be banished outright, or are people merely misinformed about how to manage their cats after the procedure?

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: There are many scientific studies that show the rates of immediate and long-term complications from declawing may be as high as 50% and 20% respectively. This means one out of two and one out of five cats will have post-surgical complications. These complications include permanent lameness and death. One must only ask a concerned shelter worker to know that the chances of behavior changes are too large for declawing to be acceptable. When the complications will show up is also in question. Some cats will have immediate changes; some will have problems as they get older. What risk level is acceptable for your cat?

Not every pregnant woman who took thalidomide had a deformed baby, but the risk was great enough to get the drug banned in this country. In most of the world, veterinarians have concluded that the risks of declawing – and the risks of ear-cropping and tail-docking – are just too great. In a growing number of countries, these procedures are illegal; in many more, the procedures are considered unethical by the veterinary profession. In England, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons considers declawing to be mutilation and states, "It is not acceptable if carried out for the convenience of the owner.... The removal of claws, particularly those which are weight-bearing, to preclude damage to furnishings is not acceptable."

Remember, our animals do not benefit from any of these procedures; they are done, in the case of ear-cropping and tail-docking, for a human's arbitrary esthetic preference, or, in the case of declawing, for the convenience of humans – so they will not have to bother training their cats or providing them with alternative places to scratch.

Some people will tell me that their cats were declawed and have no problems. After I explain to them what the potential problems are, many will come back and say that now that they are educated, they can see the problems. One person saw a lecture I gave about the big cats. These wild animals have paws that are just magnified versions of the domestic cat's paws, and then that person noticed that indeed her domestic cat did have abnormalities subsequent to declawing.

Here is a list of the subtle problems I have seen in declawed domestic cats:

- The cats have truncated paws and the digital pads, the four little gummy-drop pads on the bottom of the cat's paws, are not oval, supple and plump. Instead they are rounded, atrophied and dry. Compare the front, declawed paws to the back, clawed paws if there is a question.
- The cats do not walk up on their toes; instead, they walk back on their "wrists." This is very apparent in the big cats. You can see it if you log on to www.PawProject.org and watch Kona the mountain lion walk.
- They miss the litter box every so often or regularly. I have one patient who backs into the litter box because his front paws are declawed and apparently he doesn't like the feeling of the litter. I have another patient who, without digging, urinates in the box, but when it comes to defecating, apparently she doesn't want to dig and so she does it right outside the box and buries it with the bathroom rug. The person who brought her in didn't even think that this might be related to declawing. He thought it was just sloppiness. Now, he gives her a litter box with a rag in it and she is using it instead of the floor.
- Declawed cats are often an extreme in shyness or aggressiveness. I find that often the tortoiseshell females become excessively shy when they are declawed and that big white males often compensate by becoming more aggressive.

This being said, I am glad that your cats are not suffering from declawing. Some veterinarians seem to think that if cats are declawed before they are 16 weeks old, they can recover with fewer problems. I don't believe that is the answer either. Declawing a baby who hasn't had a chance to learn what is right and what is wrong is still unacceptable and also goes against AVMA guidelines, which clearly state that declawing should be considered only after all other options, like routine nail trims and appropriate scratching posts, have been exhausted.

Grab bag of kitty questions

Question from a member: My cat was declawed before I adopted him. I would like to adopt another cat but was concerned about bringing in a cat with claws. Would this make things difficult for my original cat? Should I only adopt a cat who has already been declawed?

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: I believe that adopting either a clawed cat or a declawed cat is worthwhile. I have seen both clawed and declawed living harmoniously in households. I have also seen big cats, like tigers and lions, living without confrontation, clawed and declawed together in one pen. I would advise that you choose a cat who is most in need of a home as your new companion. This is a formula for success.

Question from Naomi: I have two cats, both front-declawed only. I certainly did not know at the time that there were as many adverse consequences. Now my adored cat P.D. has one front foot that bothers her. I often wish I had not made the choice I did. That said, there are no materials out there to support training a cat who is not declawed not to poke holes in you. How does one train a cat not to hurt you when they are trying to love you?

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: Training a cat to accept nail trims and to use a scratching post isn't difficult. Rewards and lavish attention are the keys. After the cat has a nail trim, be sure to offer lots of praise and a treat or two. To train a cat to use a scratching post, put a little bit of catnip on the post and scratch on it yourself. Let the cat know how fun that is.

Within a short time, your cats will understand what the correct use of their nails is and what is not. Also, make sure that the cats have ample toys to play with to avoid scratching you. There are multiple websites that deal with training cats to play rough with their toys and not with their humans. The basic idea is to give the cats an outlet for their "attack behavior" without it being on your skin. (From the forum moderator: One resource is Best Friends' You & Your Pets resource library at www.bestfriends.org.)

I am sorry to hear that P.D.'s paw is bothering her. You might take her to a compassionate veterinarian who could offer you one of the following options:

1. If the problem has to do with nail regrowth under the skin, the veterinarian can remove the nail (and bone) fragments to make her more comfortable. Nail regrowth under the skin, or through the skin in some cases, is very common in declawed cats. It has to do with the bone fragment that is left inside the cat's paw having germinal nail tissue on it. This tissue will grow nail under the skin and many times, when the nail gets long enough, it will pop out of the skin. This is very painful and can be somewhat corrected by a veterinarian.
2. If the problem is pain, the veterinarian might offer your cat pain-relief medications for a month or more.

Question from Cheryl: Can you give me more information on what CatAround scratchers are, and where they can be purchased?

Response from Dr. Jennifer Conrad: I have a couple of Corner Savers, made by CatAround, a great company whose president really cares. They are sisal-covered free-standing posts that wrap the corner of a sofa, chair or wall. They protect the corners of furniture or walls from being shredded by your cat's natural scratching behavior. The CatAround website (<http://www.cataround.com>) has photos and information for online ordering of the Corner Savers.

My cats really like them. They also love the inclined Alpine Scratchers made by Cosmic Pet (<http://www.cosmicpet.com>) and the tall scratching posts made by Felix Katnip Tree Company (<http://www.felixkatnipreecompany.com>).

Member comments

Member comments about whether declawing keeps cats in homes:

Comment from Jason: So often, someone who feels that their furniture is more important than an animal's well-being has a low level of commitment to that cat. One of the "conditions" to the cat being able to live in that home is that they not damage the furniture/rugs. However, even if he or she is lucky enough to escape developing secondary behavior concerns from the declawing, the cat could be relinquished for any

number of other unwritten “breaches of contract,” including making too much noise, jumping on the counter or chewing up houseplants.

The destructive clawing – or even the potential that the cat might, at some point in the future, ruin something with their claws – is just the concern of the moment. After that, there’s shedding, being too needy, too aloof, hissing at the family dog and so on. In other words, that person could be a relinquishment waiting to happen. Declawing the cat doesn't solve the problem.

Comment from Carrie: I volunteer with domestic cats at a no-kill shelter and am well aware of the problems of finding these mutilated kitties safe and loving homes. I also volunteer with abandoned (or worse) captive-born wild cats at a nearby sanctuary and see our biggest residents suffer with arthritis and other problems caused by declawing. One of our residents suffers from the after-effects of a horribly botched job, probably performed with tin snips.

I just want to say that Dr. Conrad is my new hero. When I read her bio, it made me want to start life over again and do HALF of what she has accomplished! Thank you so much for finding such incredible guests for your forum!

Comment from Dr. Linda East: I must take exception to the suggestion to rehome a cat rather than mutilate it. Rehoming a cat only takes up another home slot, leaving some cat in a shelter somewhere to be euthanized because it was not adopted. I also object to the term "mutilate," because it is a term designed to inflame rather than to educate.

First, I will say that I hate declawing. I was a cat vet for 25 years and did perform declaws because I know there are many thousands of homes where cats would not be allowed if not declawed. I saw it as a way to provide more homes for cats, just as the neutering of male cats allows more of them to live inside houses. The surgery is not necessarily barbaric, although it can be. My patients were up and walking around within hours, and went home the same day without bandages.

I have heard that declawed cats do not use the litter box (because of pain, which I do not believe they have if surgery is done correctly), but I have never known this to be a complaint in my practice, any more than it is with undeclawed cats. (There have been studies done, as well, showing this to be false.) I did notice that declawed cats tend to bite more. They certainly can defend themselves. I had several cases of cats come in after fighting off dog attacks very successfully.

If declawing is something done so that more cats are accepted into people's homes and lives, could we please get away from the emotional exaggerations and guilt trips when we talk about it?

Comments from members about whether declawed cats do fine:

Comment from Norma: First, I want to thank you for making this invaluable information about cat declawing available. I've already passed it on to several of my clients, because it completely supports and intensifies the message I give clients when faced with the declaw issue.

For some people, what I'm about to say may sound just too darned strange. However, in my experience as an animal communicator, some of the greatest pain I have encountered in cats (physical initially, then a tremendous amount of emotional pain) is following declawing. I get called to deal with these cats, often as a last resort, and have heard stories that simply break my heart. Fortunately, often just letting the cats express their emotions, ask questions, and hear their human companion say they have learned the hard way how harmful this can be to their cat and would never do it to another, is enough to help modify the behavior. Very often the cats will again become loving, non-biting, happy companions.

I know many people, including caring veterinarians, still find it difficult to embrace the idea that animals have such deep emotions and are capable of expressing their thoughts and feelings to humans in a very precise and specific manner. However, after many years of communicating with animals professionally, I can guarantee that every animal is capable of understanding English (or French, German, Spanish, etc.) and they appreciate having someone talk with them rather than to them. And just like humans, they appreciate an apology now and then. They don't expect us to be perfect; they just want to help us learn from our mistakes.

Hopefully, people will understand that even a good veterinarian only knows what he/she has been taught, and there is always room (and a need) for new information. The worst day is the one when we awake and think we have nothing new to learn.

Comment from a member: Two of my three cats are declawed and are perfectly fine as well. I don't agree that it should be banned; it should be an owner's choice whether or not to have it done. My first cat was a major problem regarding ripping up furniture; no amount of alternative scratch surfaces, repellent, or training changed the problem. The issue of declawing is another one of those animal rights things. Places are banning it because of animal rightists who insist people cease these activities because they want a non-animal use nation.

Comments from members about influencing vets not to offer declaw surgeries:

Comment from Susan: I am very pleased and applaud our vet clinic that they strongly discourage declawing in cats. They even go so far as to provide a printout to their clients depicting a drawing of what the surgery entails, the negative aspects, and the alternatives. (Similar brochures can be downloaded or ordered from www.avar.org at <http://www.avar.org/catdeclawbrochure.pdf>.) They do still perform the procedure if clients insist (and of course, they often do), but I wish more vets would go to these lengths to discourage this procedure.

Comment from (another) Susan: Thanks to Dr. Conrad for addressing an issue that I believe is not honestly talked about enough by shelters and veterinarians to cat guardians. Although I used to think it was enough to just verbally discourage declawing to adopters, I now know that providing written information as well as having a "no declaw" clause in our adoption contracts is a must.

On several heartbreaking occasions, we've gotten feedback from adopters who went ahead and declawed because their vet said it was not harmful, and the results were cats crying out in pain for weeks, as well as calm, loving cats becoming aggressive, distressed cats after surgery. Especially troubling is vets claiming that laser surgery is

the best way to go (even though the end result is the same – a cat without their precious claws) when it says right in the 2005 January *Veterinary Medicine Journal* that "complication rates for the laser group were higher than those for the scalpel group. This finding conflicts with the results of previous studies and most empirical claims." I cannot find a vet anywhere in my city who refuses to perform the surgery and I'm finding it extremely difficult to allow a vet to care for my animals that willingly amputates toe parts from animals when it is not necessary.

Comment from Carole about what if a cat hurts someone: I am a diabetic, and I volunteer for an animal shelter. Diabetics are more susceptible to skin infections, and the skin on my arms and legs has become very thin. I have, in fact, gotten scratches from both cats and dogs, and one did become infected. Having said all that, would I stop going to the shelter to help animals? Would I get rid of my personal pets? Absolutely not!

I use common sense now. I wear long sleeves and long pants when I handle unfamiliar animals. My pets and I are familiar with me, and we handle each other carefully. People who become ill and isolated are often motivated to live by the thought of caring for their dependent animals. Having animals can even reduce the need for medications and shorten hospital stays, and I recommend letting the woman in question make the decision about pets herself.

© 2007 Best Friends All Rights Reserved.
Building a better world through kindness to animals