



ARIZONA HUMANE SOCIETY

Improving the Lives of Animals Since 1957

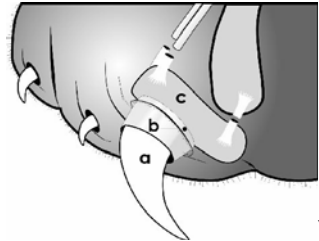
FACT SHEET: CAT DECLAWING

Cats have some interesting and unique behaviors. They rub up against you in an almost rhythmic dance pattern. They communicate their needs by meowing in a variety of voices and we eventually learn what each unique sound means. They crawl on your lap, purr and knead you as if you are a loaf of bread: OUCH! They also have a very destructive but natural behavior: SCRATCHING!

The Arizona Humane Society does not condone declawing. We consider declawing to be an inhumane and, in most situations, unnecessary, procedure. If you have exhausted **ALL** other alternatives, and you feel that you must either declaw or give up your cat, we would rather see your cat stay in the home and remain your lifelong companion. If you do decide to declaw we suggest you have the surgery done at the same time that she is spayed (or neutered if your cat is a male) or under anesthesia for another surgery; that you **ONLY** declaw the front paws; and you **ALWAYS** keep your cat indoors wearing a collar with an up-to-date I.D. tag.

The Cat's Claws -

a. Claw b. Germinal cells (responsible for growth) c. Toe



Your veterinarian extends the toe and severs the bone, ligaments and nerve endings at or just after the last joint, on every claw on each foot. If positioned wrongly, the cut may involve the pad or re-growth may occur.

Most mammals' walk on the soles of the paws or feet, cats however walk on their toes. Their back, shoulder, paw, leg joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves are naturally designed to support its weight across its toes as it walks, runs and climbs.

What Is Declawing?

Declawing is not just clipping the claws extremely short - it is **surgery**. Actually, an amputation, to be exact. The first joint of each toe is amputated at the first joint (3rd phalanx bone). The medical term for declawing is an Onychectomy. Here's what you can expect:

1. Your cat receives a general anesthetic.
2. The nails and foot area are scrubbed with surgical scrub and sterile saline and then swabbed with alcohol.
3. A tourniquet is tied around each foot, to cut off the blood supply.
4. Each nail is amputated with a guillotine nail cutter or scalpel blade to dissect through the joint, which cuts across the first joint through skin, ligaments and nerve endings. The newest procedure involves the use of lasers; it still is surgery, but has been proven to decrease blood loss, but not pain.

5. Most veterinarians use a skin glue to close the surgery site, however some incisions may require suturing.
6. The paws may require bandaging to prevent hemorrhaging and to provide some padding. Your veterinarian removes the bandage in about 2 - 3 days.

Immediate: Possible Complications

There are medical, physical and emotional considerations to be aware of when you decide to have your cat declawed.

Physical

- There is the possibility of an adverse reaction to general anesthesia.
- If the bandages are on too tight, circulation may be cut or decreased resulting in infection.
- Many cats begin to hemorrhage when the bandages are removed; thus requiring additional bandaging.
- Your cat may experience a reaction ranging from mild discomfort to extreme pain.
- Complete healing can take up to a few weeks and can be a painful ordeal.
- You will need to provide your cat with shredded paper litter for the first couple of weeks. It is important that litter does not stick on their paws following the surgery.

Emotional

Cats can feel pain just like any other animal; imagine what it must feel like to wake up to find out you have had your knuckles, or even just your fingernails removed!

- As your cat is waking in a groggy state, she cannot understand, why her paws are throbbing and bandaged.
- The first time she tries to walk, run, jump, stretch and/or scratch, it may hurt; she may not want to walk because of the pain.
- She may stop playing, jumping and interacting with you because simply walking is too painful. Some cats get over it quickly; others may not be interactive for a long time.
- Chronic back and joint pain may occur as shoulder and leg muscles weaken.

Later: Possible Complications

Physical

- If the entire nail bed was not removed completely, the claws can grow back; usually, painful, deformed and useless.
- Re-growth of a nail is called a Sequestrum; due to improper removal of the bone at the time of surgery. If a nail grows back, you must take your cat to your veterinarian.

Emotional

- Frequently cats become distrustful of his/her owner and/or veterinarian. "With rare exception, the declawed cat is the most difficult to examine and treat," states Paul Rowen, D.V.M.
- A declawed cat is more likely to bite if she feels threatened, by another animal, a child or even her surroundings.
- They are more likely to hide and become less social and active with you or other animals.
- Change in their environment or additions of new pets or people often cause them to hide or stop using their litter box.
- When adopted from a shelter they may display aggression and/or fearful behaviors, and may take a longer to adjust to a new family.

What Can You Do? About Scratching

Fortunately, there are a variety of options and products that make this annoying, but natural, behavior tolerable and fit for human habitation.

Scratching post: A scratching post is the easiest and least expensive way to curb your cat's need to scratch furniture. Provide her a suitable object to scratch, such as a scratching post. A suitable scratching post means suitable to her, not you.

All cats have different scratching preferences; these are some of the things to consider:

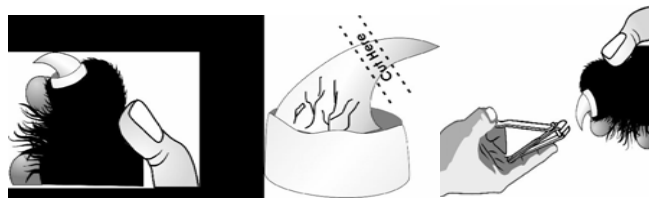
- Location, location, location
- Height
- Horizontal/Vertical
- Texture: carpet, sisal, wood, cardboard
- Stability

It is rather easy to train your cat to use her scratching post consistently. (See our handout on Destructive Scratching)

Claw Clipping: Clipping claws is easier than you think; if you make touching and pressing on their paws a daily ritual, they will be less stressed and/or agitated when you pick up their paws to clip them. You can use human fingernail or toenail clippers, baby or manicure scissors or scissors made specifically for small animal nail trimming.

- Hold the cat on your lap until she is comfortable. If you can, turn her on her back and pet her until she is relaxed or almost asleep. Press gently on the top of the paw near the base of the nail to extend the claw.
- Hold the paw firmly with the claw extended. Clip off ONLY the curved end of the claw. If you clip into the thick part of the claw, (the pink area where the veins are located,) you will hurt your cat. If you are not sure where to clip, or uncomfortable, DON'T! Consult your veterinarian or groomer.
- If your cat yowls or fidgets when you clip, make sure you are not pressing too hard or tightly on your cat's paw, or that you did not cut too closely.
 - If this is not the case, do not allow your cat to convince you that she is in pain - she is not!
- When you are done give her a very special treat and a lot of extra praise and attention! Alternatively, if your cat is passive aggressive, let her play with a very active toy.

Follow the exact same procedure with each claw. Do not forget to praise, comfort, and/or distract your cat while you are doing this. If you have trouble, ask someone to help you. Cats seldom use their back claws to scratch inappropriately, but you may want to clip them anyway. Here is a visual guide to help you:



In picture A, you can see where to 'press' gently to expose the cat's claw for clipping.

In picture B, look for the pink veins; you'll want to avoid clipping them!

In picture C, you'll want to hold gently but firmly as you prepare to clip.

Soft Paws: are painless soft vinyl nail caps that keep cats' nails blunt and harmless 4 - 5 times longer than routine nail trimming. The caps are durable and held in place by an adhesive. They are available in three sizes and a variety of fun colors. You may want your veterinarian or groomer to show you how to apply them initially.

- They usually stay on for 4 - 6 weeks, depending on the rate of nail growth and the activity level of your cat.
- They are easy to apply. You must first trim the nails, then apply the cap with a small amount of adhesive you stick it onto the clipped nail. Within a few minutes, the adhesive will be dry. By the time you are finished, the glue will be dry.

- Your cat may require a short adjustment period to get used to wearing the Soft Paws. Your cat may try licking or shaking its paws and may even try to chew or pull off a cap or two. These behaviors are normal and temporary.
- If your cat is successful at pulling them off, just reapply a new cap. If she swallows the cap, do not panic. The cap is made of 'inert' vinyl that is neither toxic nor prone to obstruction.
- As the nails grow, the caps will fall off. Simply repeat the process again.

Desensitization: Is a method to teach your cat to respond in a non-fearful or non-aggressive manner to an unpleasant situation, in this case, nail clipping.

- Begin by touching her paws at a level that does not cause any reaction, while offering a pleasant reward, such as a treat or petting in her favorite spot.
- Keep repeating this; gradually introduce more intensity. Eventually you will be able to hold her paw without any resistance.
- Then begin touching her paws with the clippers, and praise her as before.
- Clip one nail and praise, then another nail until you have completed a paw. You may be able to get only one or two nails done at first.
- If you sense that resistance is coming end on a positive note.

Do not force the issue or you may have to go back to square one. No matter which method you decide upon, it will go much more smoothly if you practice this ritual continually. The more you touch and squeeze your cat's paws; the less it will become a traumatic event. This must be done **very gradually**. Keep repeating this; gradually introduce more intensity. Eventually you will be able to hold her paw with out any resistance.

When to Get Help

Because desensitization can be difficult to do, and because behavior problems may increase if these techniques are done incorrectly or are rushed, you may want to get professional, in-home help from an animal behavior specialist. It is important to keep in mind that a fearful cat who feels trapped or is pushed too far may become aggressive.

Consult With Your Veterinarian

If you continue to have difficulty or it is too stressful on you and your cat, your veterinarian can help you. Do not attempt to give your cat any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting with your veterinarian. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your cat. Animals do not respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for humans or dogs could be fatal to your cat. Drug therapy alone won't reduce fears and phobias permanently. In extreme cases, behavior modification and medication used together may be the best approach.

What *Not* to Do

- Do not punish your cat for being afraid. Punishment will only make her more fearful.
- Do not try to force your cat to experience the object or situation that is causing her to be afraid.
- Animals do not understand punishment after the fact, even if it is only seconds later. Scratching or biting you is the result of panic, not misbehavior. Punishment will do more harm than good.

For more information, please visit

www.azhumane.org

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