

Client Handout



Why does my cat scratch?

Scratching with the front claws is a very normal, instinctive behavior for cats. Just like humans, the cat nail continuously grows from the inside out. The purpose for routine scratching is to remove the old sheaths (nail fragments) from the nail. These sheaths are the nails you may occasionally find around your house. Cats also scratch to mark their territory. The underside of the cat paw contains small scent glands. The scent gets deposited on whatever object the cat has associated with its territory. Declawed cats will continue to scratch in order to mark their territory with their individual scent, even though they no longer have claws. While scratching is a normal cat behavior, it can be destructive and costly in the home, and the bond between the cat and owner may be stressed. Some cats are aggressive and run the risk of injuring people or transmitting bacteria and viruses (although very rare). Cat scratches could pose a serious health risk for people who have immune compromising diseases, like diabetes and AIDS, and those with blood coagulation (clotting problems). Owners need to be aware that declawing removes an essential cat defense mechanism, and should NOT be considered for those that go outdoors.



Surgical Techniques

Declawing (onychectomy) is performed under general anesthesia, and is commonly done one of two ways: excisional method or guillotine (clipper) method. The excisional method removes ALL of the last bone (P3) of the toe. The claw extends from this bone, and it is similar to the small bone that the human fingernail covers. This is most commonly done with a scalpel blade, although some veterinarians are now using a LASER for this. LASER is an acronym for Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission Radiation. In short, it is a device that generates beam of light energy at a specific wavelength. There is also the guillotine method, which uses a clipper that severs the P3 bone in half, removing the claw and distal (end) part of the bone. Here at La Crosse Veterinary Clinic we use the excisional method and our surgical LASER for all declaw procedures. The excisional method protects the toe pads and eliminates any chance of nail growth. Using the surgical LASER seals the blood vessels and nerve endings through cauterization and makes the procedure virtually bloodless. The surgical LASER also reduces the risk of infection because through the superheating of the tissues in the incision site, it destroys any bacteria.



After the surgery, the incisions are closed with surgical tissue glue so no suture removal is required. Bandages are also placed on your cat's feet to help control any bleeding or oozing that may occur and to keep the cat from harming itself during the recovery process. These bandages are removed the following day and the feet are examined for any post-surgical problems. Pain control medication is administered before and after surgery, and for several days following the surgery.

Age to Declaw

Younger is better. Cats that are between 3 to 8 months old and not overweight are the best candidates for a declaw surgery. Your cat should weigh at least 4 pounds prior to surgery. They do experience discomfort, but recover faster and with fewer complications than older and/or overweight cats. In general, we do not recommend declawing cats over 3 years of age because of the greater risk of physical and behavioral complications.

Possible Complications

Complications can include, but are not limited to, the following: bleeding from incision sites, infection at the incision sites, nerve damage, ligament damage, pad injury, limping, or personality changes. Some cats that are declawed for aggression purposes may turn to biting as their defensive mechanism. Other complications may include: sensitivity and/or limping for some time after the surgery. It is unknown if cats experience “phantom pain” from the missing digits as it has been noted in humans, but some cats do limp after the surgery with no apparent wounds or healing problems. As with any surgical procedure, if the incision sites were to open from the cat being too active soon after the surgery they would require regluing or suturing.

Alternatives to Declawing

First of all, we need to provide alternatives to our furniture and rugs. Simply keeping a cat without any means to do what comes naturally is often the starting point for household destruction. Cats are very texture-orientated, and also have positional preferences. Some cats prefer a wide range of surfaces to test their claws on; from cardboard to sisal rope to carpet, and even tree bark. Some like to stand upright on their hind legs at a full stretch and may need a very tall post to accommodate their height. Other cats like to dig into a surface underneath them and may prefer a horizontal pad. Other cats like a variety to suit their whims. Most pet stores offer a variety of posts, pads, mats, and platforms for cats to scratch but owners can make their own cat posts and accessories as long as they use sturdy, non-toxic materials.



The second step is to get your cat to play with the new objects. Cats are very social, and want to be with us in the areas we use, so the new post will need to be located where the action is, not hidden in an unused portion of the home. The best place to put the post is where the cat has already started to scratch. The cat already has a preference for this location, and out of habit will continue to use this area. If you are lucky and the cat has not yet picked an area to scratch, you can choose one for the cat, but remember, the cat wants to be where you are. Begin to play with your cat around the post or pads and encourage the cat to grab onto the surface by scratching it or dangling toys and placing catnip around it. Once the cat is playing and scratching around the post, praise the cat for being such a fast learner. Cats understand positive reinforcement like praise and petting. Recent behavior studies indicate they don't respond well to yelling or other aversion

techniques when they are doing something undesirable. **IT IS NEVER RECOMMENDED TO PHYSICALLY PUNISH YOUR CAT BY SPANKING IT OR HITTING IT IN ANY WAY.** If the cat accidentally scratches on something you don't want it to, keep on reinforcing the praise when the cat gets things right. As the post or pad becomes marked with the cat's scent, and has a nice frayed texture (which cats do find attractive) the cat will be less likely to want to scratch other objects because it will have imprinted on the desired scratching area.



For illustration only.

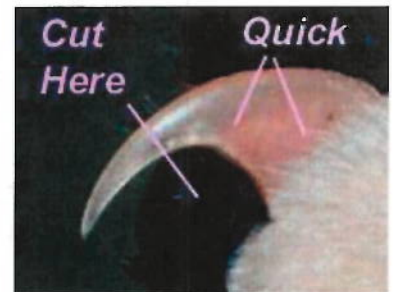
While you are teaching the cat to scratch where you want, you can also make things you don't want the cat to scratch much less appealing to the cat. This is one kind of negative reinforcement that works. One method is to take clear plastic wrap (buy the "real" Saran Wrap because it is a bit thicker so it's more durable and easier



© iStockphoto / Thinkstock

to work with) and wrap the base and sides of furniture with a few overlapping layers of material. Cats don't like the slick texture and will tend to avoid it. It does make the house look funny while the cat is in training, but it's only temporary. This also works as a deterrent even when you are not home or during the night when you are sleeping. When the cat has imprinted on the desired posts and pads, you can take away the wrapping. You can reapply the wrap at any time if the cat needs a "refresher" course. Along a similar vein, you can also tape thick paper to the furniture and use double-sided sticky tape to layer over the surface of the paper. Cats hate sticking to objects and although the tape needs to be refreshed every few

days, this is a very successful means for controlling the problem behavior. This method also works for counter and tabletop surfaces where you do not want your cat walking. Just make sure to tape the base layer of the paper firmly to the surface underneath so the paper doesn't wrap up onto the cat as it sticks! Another method is to tie clean, empty soda cans together through the pull tabs with long pieces of string, and balance the cans on top of the furniture your cat is scratching, with the strings hanging in his line of scratching. As he scratches and pulls the strings and cans down on himself, it may help deter him from this area. Other clients have used bubble wrap, tinfoil, and plastic rug-runners for deterrents. The important point is to be consistent and persistent until the behavior is controlled. During the time of training, it is important to keep the cats nails trimmed short to prevent as much damage as possible. There are a variety of nail trimmers sold at pet stores. Have someone teach you how to safely trim a cat's nails so both you and the cat are comfortable with this process.



Some people have tried commercially available nail caps for cats. Soft paws is a popular brand and can be obtained through many pet stores or online. They are soft, pliable plastic caps shaped like a cat nail. They are available in a variety of colors and sizes. These caps are glued directly onto the nail. ON average, the caps will last 4-8 weeks. When the nails have grown out, and/or the nail caps have fallen off, new caps will need to be applied.

Feliway is another product that can help guide where cats scratch and help get them to scratch on certain objects other than furniture. Feliway is a synthetic analog of the feline facial pheromone which reproduces the familiarization properties normally produces by the cat when it deposits its own facial pheromones in the environment. By using the Feliway on the areas where your cat shouldn't be scratching you are giving them the sense that they do not need to scratch that area anymore because they have already marked it with their scent. They will be more inclined to scratch on other things to mark them such as the new scratching post or pad. Feliway is available in a spray or diffuser form, we recommend using the spray for the areas your cat is scratching but both the spray and the diffuse are great for scratching and stressful situations your cat might be exposed to.



Conclusion

There are other products and suggestions we can help you with if the above strategies fail, but it is best to start when the cat is young and the behavior is new so that it does not become established in a negative manner. We understand that there are many issues to consider before making the choice to declaw, and it is not a decision to be made lightly. We hope the information in this handout has helped you to make the best decision for you and your cat. Please contact us if you have further questions.



**La Crosse Veterinary Clinic
2128 State Road 16
La Crosse, WI 54601
(608) 781-3466**