

# Declawing Cats: More Than Just a Manicure



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People choose to declaw their cats for a number of reasons: Some are frustrated with shredded drapes or furniture, some are worried about being scratched, and others simply feel that a declawed cat is easier to live with. In many cases, cats are declawed preemptively, as a part of a spay/neuter package offered by veterinarians, even before claw-related problems occur.

Too often people believe that declawing is a simple surgery that removes a cat's nails, the equivalent of a person having her fingernails trimmed. Sadly, this is far from the truth. Declawing traditionally involves the amputation of the last bone of each toe and, if performed on a human being, it would be comparable to cutting off each finger at the last knuckle.

Declawing can leave cats with a painful healing process, long-term health issues, and numerous behavior problems. This is especially unfortunate because declawing is an owner-elected procedure and unnecessary for the vast majority of cats.

## **What about Laser Surgery?**

During laser surgery, a small, intense beam of light cuts through tissue by heating and vaporizing it, meaning there's less bleeding and a shorter recovery time. But the surgical technique itself is similar to the traditional method (or "onychectomy"), with the laser simply replacing a steel scalpel blade. So while the use of a laser may slightly reduce the duration of the healing process, it does not change the nature of the procedure.

## **Tenectomy**

Another procedure introduced more recently effectively deactivates cats' claws by severing the tendons that extend the toes. Called a "tendonectomy," the surgery retains the claws in the paws and is often thought to be more humane because of its shorter recovery time. But the method has its own set of problems. Since cats are unable to keep their claw length in check through vigorous scratching, owners must continually trim nails to prevent them from growing into the paw pads and causing infections. And though tendonectomies are generally considered less traumatic because of decreased post-operative pain, a 1998 study published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* found the incidence of bleeding, lameness, and infection was similar for both procedures. Furthermore, the American Veterinary Medical Association does not recommend tendonectomies as an alternative.

While there have been changes in the way that cats are declawed, it's still true that for the majority of cats, these surgical procedures are unnecessary. Educated owners can easily train their cats to use their claws in a manner that allows animal and owner to happily coexist.

Declawing and tendonectomies should be reserved only for those rare cases in which a cat has a medical problem that would warrant such surgery—or after exhausting all other options, it becomes clear that the cat cannot be properly trained and, as a result, would be removed from the home. In these cases, a veterinarian should inform the cat's caretakers about complications associated with the surgical procedures (including the possibility of infection, pain, and lameness) so that owners have realistic expectations about the outcome. There is just as much evidence to support the case against declawing as there is research to support it, with some studies finding few or only short-term adverse reactions to the surgery and others finding medical complications and significant differences in behavior.

Purchasing or building a scratching post is an important step in training a cat to avoid destructive scratching. Several companies manufacture scratching posts and other products that appeal to cats. Some companies and organizations have developed similar plans for do-it-yourselfers. Here's a sampling of the products out there:

Felix Katnip Tree Company  
206-547-0042  
[www.felixkatnipcompany.com](http://www.felixkatnipcompany.com)

Homemade Cat Ladder  
[www.caws.org](http://www.caws.org)

How to Build a Scratching Post  
[www.catsinternational.org](http://www.catsinternational.org)

The Scratch Absorber  
[www.catspecialtiesbyzoey.com](http://www.catspecialtiesbyzoey.com)

#### **Other Resources**

Sticky Paws  
1-888-697-2873  
[www.stickypaws.com](http://www.stickypaws.com)

Soft Paws  
1-800-989-2542  
[www.softpaws.com](http://www.softpaws.com)