

# SHOULD I DECLAW MY CAT?

The Richmond SPCA does not recommend the declawing of cats. Though you will find individuals on either side of the fence, declawing is a highly controversial procedure and is increasingly regarded as animal cruelty. Declawing is banned or significantly limited in more than 20 countries, including most of Europe.

Whether or not to declaw is your decision, but please make it an informed decision. Do adequate research including reading about the subject and talking with multiple veterinarians.

Scratching is a natural, instinctual behavior, and even declawed cats will try to scratch. Cats scratch in order to mark their territory, to stretch and to keep their claws healthy. In fact, scratching releases endorphins that provide psychological comfort, thus leading to happier cats. It is important to provide cats with outlets for them to scratch in an appropriate manner, like scratching posts.

Declawing is not like trimming your cat's claws too close to the paw. Declawing, or onychectomy, is the amputation of the third phalanx. Cat claws grow directly from the bone, so the last joint of his or her toe must be removed in order to remove the claw. This is a major orthopedic surgery that requires full anesthesia and has a recovery period of several weeks. Additionally, declawing is an elective procedure that is not medically necessary, except in rare cases. Veterinarians have an obligation to educate their clients about declawing and to provide them with alternatives.

A significant concern for cats who are declawed is the risk to the cat if he or she were to get outside, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The surgery also carries with it many well-documented risks: acute and chronic pain, infection, anesthetic complications, hemorrhage, nerve trauma, lameness, phantom sensations, long-term joint stiffness and arthritis. There is also the risk that the nail will re-grow and become infected if the tiniest piece of nail is left in the socket since cats' nails grow from the bone.

There are also behavioral risks to consider:

- Litter box avoidance due to pain experienced while scratching in litter during recovery from surgery
- Removing the claws can resort to the cat biting in defense
- Generalized fear or confusion, and even a change in personality

There are many alternatives to declawing:

- Regularly trim your cat's nails
- Use synthetic claw caps to cover the nails
- Use pheromone sprays or diffusers to relieve stress and anxiety
- Plastic covers or sticky strips can be used to protect furniture and deter against scratching
- Provide appropriate places to scratch

You are your cat's guardian. Many people can offer you information and opinions about how to best care for your cat. Ultimately, you are the person who makes the decisions about your cat's welfare. Our behavior specialists at 804-643-SPCA are available to help you find answers to any questions you may have, as well as provide counseling and advice if you are having trouble with inappropriate scratching.

Please make this decision carefully and thoughtfully. If you must declaw, be sure to research the most up-to-date procedures and pain management, such as laser surgery, for example.

By the way, if you are considering the risk of cat claws in your home and you haven't yet invited a cat into your home, declawed cats can regularly be found awaiting new families at our adoption center.