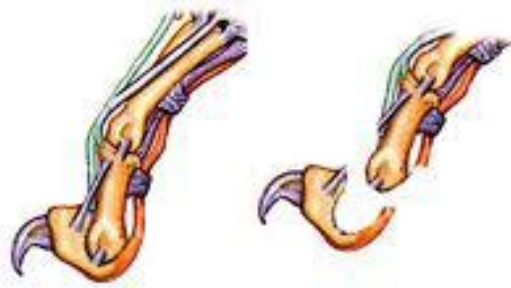


Declawing and Other Alternatives

What is declawing?

A declawing or onychectomy is an elective surgery (not obligatory for the health of the animal) that is performed on cats and involves amputating the distal phalanges of the animal's toes, those that hold the nails. Although the Quebec Order of Veterinary Doctors has stated in various documents that the procedure is not recommended, declawing continues to be practiced legally on a large scale by Quebecers for purely practical reasons. Declawing is illegal in twenty-nine countries.



Cat owners have their animals declawed in order to prevent them from clawing furniture, scratching people and other animals. Declawing is a painful procedure and a radical solution to eliminate a behaviour that is normal for cats, clawing. They do it for the following reasons :

- Clawing releases the nails from their sheaths and this allows them to grow.
- Clawing is a means of communication. The cat visually marks its territory and leaves an odour that is secreted from the glands between the toes.
- Cats love stretching and this involves clawing.

Certain owners believe that a declawed cat will no longer want to claw, chase birds or climb trees. Declawing will not totally stop these behaviors, but can reduce them.

What are the risks associated with declawing?

The medical risks include hemorrhaging, infection, chronic limping, exposure of the remaining bone of the toe and complications associated with general anesthesia. Declawing is the equivalent to amputating a human's fingertip (1st phalang).



A cat can sometimes experience phantom pain following the operation. Its brain detects pain in the nails even though they have been removed.

After the intervention some cats stop using their litter boxes even if the owner uses a soft litter. Certain cats refuse to let anyone touch their paws and some have a tendency to bite more. Other cats are unable to walk properly and this can reduce their normal activity.



Declawing also represents a danger for cats that go outside because they no longer have nails to defend themselves. They are also unable to climb in order to escape from dangerous situations.

What are some alternatives to declawing?

First, you must take into consideration your cat's regular behavior in its environment. Check to see if your cat prefers to claw a rug or a vertical surface such as the armrest of a sofa. You can then make or buy a solid scratching pad or post that is covered with carpet or hemp. It should be stable and long enough that the cat is able to stretch out its entire body when clawing it. The scratching apparatus can be sprinkled or sprayed with catnip and should be placed at your cat's favorite location in the house.

When your cat uses the scratching pad or post, reward it with a treat or by petting it. Discourage inappropriate clawing with a firm « No » or by spraying it with a bit of water. When you leave your home, close off all of the areas that contain articles that you do not want your cat to claw. You can use two-sided tape to protect the corners or the legs of your furniture. Kittens start to claw when they are less than one month old. It is recommended to supply them with a scratching pad as soon as they are born.

You can ask your veterinarian or animal health technician to show you how to cut your cat's nails.

- Press lightly on the pads of the paws to make the nails come out.
- Cut the translucent part of the nail which does not contain veins, not the pink part which is called the pulp. The pulp grows slightly along with the translucent part and will cause severe pain to your cat if it is cut.



Nail trimming is a necessary precaution that is not painful for your pet. By cutting your cat's nails twice monthly, there is less chance of the cat hurting someone or damaging your furniture.



Another alternative that is strongly recommended by veterinarians is Soft Paws. These are soft plastic nails that are glued onto the cat's nails. This procedure can be done in a veterinary clinic by a technician or by yourself at home. The Soft Paws do not interfere with the cat's ability to extend and retract its nails nor with the natural growth of its nails. They will eventually fall off as the cat's nails grow and would need to be replaced every six to twelve weeks. The Soft Paws are totally harmless and non-toxic. The glue that is used to apply them is the same type of glue that veterinarians use during surgical procedures.



A tenectomy or tendonectomy is an alternative surgery that is not suitable for all owners nor for all cats. It consists of cutting the small tendon that allows the cat to extend its nail. Healing is a lot faster than that of a declawing procedure, but it requires a lot of attention afterwards. The cat naturally extends its nail from a small sheath that surrounds it in order to clean the nail regularly. Following a tenectomy, the owner will be required to carefully clean the cat's nails because it will no longer be able to extend them on its own. The bacteria that



gets lodged in the sheath can cause serious problems. The cat's nails would still need to be trimmed on a regular basis also.

If a declawing surgery must be performed, it is most often done on only the front paws. It is recommended that it be done at a young age. The less the animal weighs, the less pain it will experience and the faster it will heal. We use a strict analgesic protocol for pain control and this is why the cat must be hospitalised for two days following the procedure. Although it is not recommended due to humanitarian reasons, it is possible to declaw an adult cat. Adult cats are given pain medication for an extended period of time and are sometimes hospitalised for a longer period of time than younger cats. This decreases the risks of hemorrhaging and post-operative wounds because it limits the cat's movement for a few extra days. It is important for you to realize that even if all of the necessary precautions are taken, your adult can feel the aftereffects of a declawing for a long time afterwards. There is a higher risk of bleeding if a cat is declawed when it is an adult, and even more so if it is obese.

The decision to declaw a cat is part of the responsibilities that a person must take when adopting a feline companion. The pet owner must seriously consider all of the implications before making a final decision.

