

Why Cats Need Claws

by Gary Loewenthal

Originally appeared in [The Whole Cat Journal](#), September 2002. Copyright © 2002 Gary Loewenthal. Used by permission of the author; all rights reserved.

Claws are involved in almost everything a cat does during her waking hours. In the morning, she digs her claws into her scratching post and pulls against the claws' resistance to energize and tone her upper body. During playtime, her claws snag flying toys out of the air and hold them in place. When she runs across the house and up the stairs, her claws act like cleats to provide extra traction. When she scales her kitty condo, she uses her claws like miniature mountaineering crampons that let her reach the top with ease.

A cat uses claws to scratch an itch, manipulate catnip mice, grip a narrow catwalk, hoist her body up to a high-up perch, and grab onto a chair for stability during grooming. Claws are even used in self-expression; for example, a slight extension of the claws is a subtle way to say "I'm tired of being held and am ready to get down."

In some circumstances, claws are lifesavers, enabling a cat to climb to safety or thwart an attacker.

All this and much more is lost when a cat is declawed.

Most of the world does not declaw. In practically every country where cats are companion animals, declawing is illegal or effectively banned. It is still common in the U.S. and Canada.

"Declawing" is a benign-sounding term. When people first hear the word, they usually think it means some sort of claw-clipping, not a series of ten amputations that leave the cat without the end of her front paws. Pro-claw veterinarians report that over half their clients considering declawing change their minds once they find out what the procedure really is.

Declawing = Amputation

Declawing is a major operation. The "patient" is first put under general anesthesia, as the pain would be torturous without it. A tourniquet is placed around the first paw to be declawed. The veterinarian then performs a series of ten amputations. Each amputation removes the claw and the bone into which it is firmly rooted. The supporting tendon and ligament for each claw are severed. The surrounding soft tissue and flesh is cut off. A veterinary technician bandages up kitty's paws to soak up the blood. Kitty is now declawed. The retractable claws that she would have used throughout her life for scratching, playing, walking, and self-defense lie in a heap on the table, waiting to get thrown out with the trash.

The declawing operation doesn't always go smoothly. "Complications of this amputation can be excruciating pain, damage to the radial nerve, hemorrhage, bone chips that prevent healing, and painful regrowth of deformed claw inside of the paw which is not visible to the eye."¹ (From [maxshouse.com](#). Site no longer active.) Some complications necessitate a second round of anesthesia and surgery.

Even if the operation goes smoothly, the pain and anguish to which the cat is subjected when it wakes up are excruciating. Dr. Nicholas Dodman, Professor of Behavioral Pharmacology and Director of the Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine and internationally known specialist in domestic animal behavioral research, explains declawing: "The inhumanity of the procedure is clearly demonstrated by the nature of cats' recovery from anesthesia following the surgery. Unlike routine recoveries, including recovery from neutering surgeries, which are fairly peaceful, declawing surgery results in cats bouncing off the walls of the recovery cage because of excruciating pain. Cats that are more stoic huddle in the corner of the recovery cage, immobilized in a state of helplessness, presumably by overwhelming pain. . . . [Declawing] serves as model of severe pain for testing the efficacy of analgesic drugs. Even though analgesic drugs can be used postoperatively, they rarely are, and their effects are incomplete and transient anyway, so sooner or later the pain will emerge." (Excerpted from [The Cat Who Cried For Help](#), Dodman N, Bantam Books, New York).

Some veterinarians are now promoting laser declawing as a "guilt-free" procedure. While laser declawing can reduce the bleeding and perhaps diminish, to some extent, the agonizing pain, the procedure is no different, only the means of amputation.

Cats Need to Scratch--With Claws

Cats need to scratch. Scratching is hard-wired, not a discretionary activity, for a cat. Several times a day--perhaps 3000 times over her lifetime--a cat scratches to release stress, affirm territory, and exercise muscles. Claws are the heart of scratching. The tension between the embedded claws and the cat's upper body muscles creates the exercise, visual markings, and audible qualities associated with scratching.

A declawed cat cannot properly scratch. That should be reason enough to not declaw. Scratching is such an innate behavior that even declawed cats still go through the motions--but it's not a real scratch. A declawed cat can rub her paw along a scratching post and leave a scent, but she misses out on the upper body workout that a cat can only get from flexing and tugging against the impedance of dug-in claws.

Not being able to engage in a hearty scratch each day takes its toll. A declawed cat's shoulders and upper back gradually weaken, since scratching is the main way they stay strong. The whole scratching experience--the exertion, the visual impact, the noise of scraping claws--is a potent de-stressor for a cat. One cannot predict how an individual cat will react to being denied this great stress-relief source. One cat may develop lifelong aggression problems; another may apparently be fine--until faced with a stressful situation. A scratching cat is a happy cat. Declawing profoundly interferes with this core cat behavior.

Cats Walk on The Whole Paw

The paws bear the full weight of the cat. Cats stand and walk on the entire paw. When the end of the paw is amputated, as it is during a declawing operation, the cat has to modify her stance accordingly.

Being forced to walk unnaturally can put a strain on the paws and cause long-term pain. The pain may build up gradually, and may be aggravated if the cat is overweight. A cat can't tell you directly that her paws ache. You'll find that out when she starts avoiding the litter box. Dr. Susan Swanson, DVM, owner of the Cat Care Clinic in Mahtomedi, Minnesota, notes that "year after year, the declawed cats that I see in my practice have higher rates of litter box issues such as inappropriate elimination." Nearly every shelter and rescue group director in the country makes the same observation. Sore paws that don't feel like digging in the litter may be one reason why declawed cats are more prone to litter box rejection. (The accumulated stress buildup from lack of scratching may also be a contributing factor, as stress is implicated in half of all urinary tract problems).

"Shortened paws may also cause pain in other parts of the cat's body. The toes help the foot meet the ground at a precise angle to keep the leg, shoulder and back muscles and joints in proper alignment. Removal of the last digits of the toes drastically alters the conformation of their feet and causes the feet to meet the ground at an unnatural angle that can cause back pain similar to that in humans caused by wearing improper shoes."² (From maxshouse.com. Site no longer active.)

Common Declawing Myths

"My cat is just the same as ever; my cat can do all the things a clawed cat can do."

A declawed cat is not the same. He's missing the ends of his toes. He can't get the full benefit of a scratch. His gait is altered because the front of his paws are gone. He can't spear a toy or manipulate it as well as if he had claws. He can climb easy surfaces, but on more challenging terrain he can't avail himself of front claws that serve as supporting clamps, brakes, and hooks. He's at a ten-claw disadvantage if he's threatened. It's simple: there are some things that you can do with a set of sharp barbs that you can't do with a flat pad.

But those are only the mechanical differences. Cats are notorious for hiding discomfort and stoically putting up with handicaps. It's unfair to the cat to assume that he doesn't miss his claws

just because he's not explicitly complaining. Respect for the cat demands that we give him the benefit of the doubt, and presume that he'd miss something that he'd otherwise use every day.

Dr. Gordon Stull, VMD, is owner of the Vetco Veterinary Clinic in Tabernacle, New Jersey, and has seen his fair share of declawed cats. He says, "Declawing is a quite simply a mutilation that can cause physical as well as emotional damage to the cat. Not every declawed cat will suffer obvious emotional damage; some can seem like any normal cat. But if I walk into an exam room and see a domestic cat showing aggressive tendencies (threatening vocalizations, a dominant aggressive nature, and a propensity to bite) in my mind I know that nine chances out of ten this cat has been declawed, and that the aggressive behaviors are the cat's way of compensating for the traumatic declaw experience and loss of natural defenses caused by surgical declawing."

"My cat is still the most feared cat on the block; even the dogs leave him alone."

People who make this claim usually abruptly stop making it when their cat ends up at the emergency vet clinic with severe lacerations all over his body. Don't try and beat the odds. Keep your cat safely inside, and allow him to have use of all of his claws, if for no other reason than it could save his life if he escapes outside and encounters danger.

"Better to declaw than to send a cat back to the shelter to be euthanized."

Usually my first response to this assertion is to shift the focus from the world at large to the individual who's considering declawing. I ask, "are *you* going to return *your* cat to the shelter if he rips the couch apart?" So far the person has always replied "no," which is the correct answer. Once I know that the cat owner is committed to giving his cat a permanent home, the "declaw or euthanize" argument doesn't apply and we can move on to exploring friendlier, less invasive options than declawing.

Declawing is no guarantee that the cat won't go back to the shelter, however. Walk into any shelter. There are always declawed cats there. In some cases the declawing itself may be the reason that the cat ends up back at the shelter. The cat may develop behavior or litter box problems as a result of being clawless, which greatly reduces his chances of being adopted. Thus, sometimes it actually is more humane to return the cat before he gets declawed.

In fact, relatively few declaws are last-ditch efforts to save a cat from going back to the shelter. Most declaws are done preemptively and routinely, often as part of a spay/neuter package--assembly-line declawing. In veterinary clinics across the country, kittens have their claws permanently removed even in the absence of any claw-related problems, and before any humane alternatives are given a chance. Furthermore, the average cat owner consents to declawing having only a vague notion of what the procedure is, what possible side effects can occur, or even why it's necessary.

Bottom line: Don't force the "declaw or reject" choice on your cat.

"My vet wouldn't do it if it was harmful."

The flip answer is, "But he just did."

There is no consensus among veterinarians about declawing. Some veterinarians consider declawing to be extremely harmful, without benefit to the cat, and will not perform the surgery under any circumstances.

There's also a sort of impasse that has developed. On the one hand, veterinarians offer declawing because they anticipate that their clients will ask for it, if not demand it. If cat owners never requested a declaw, a great number of veterinarians would happily drop the procedure. On the other hand, cat owners declaw their cats partly because most veterinarians routinely do it. It's frightfully easy to get your cat declawed at most veterinary clinics. If enough veterinarians refused to declaw, the practice would increasingly seem less mainstream and more like a back alley operation. That alone could cause declawing rates to plummet.

Despite the fact that declawing is commonplace in the U.S. and Canada today, I expect that as both information about declawing and groups promoting the pro-claw philosophy become more abundant, declawing will gradually fall out of favor. One day, veterinarians as a whole in the U.S.

and Canada will catch up to their counterparts in the rest of world and condemn declawing as barbaric and entirely unnecessary.

"I tried everything."

In my experience, every cat owner who claims that they "tried everything" hasn't--and often hasn't really tried that much. Most have not tried trimming claws, using slipcovers, or making more than a token effort with scratching posts. Most have never even heard of [SoftPaws](#), much less attempted to use them.

A "scratching problem" may turn out to be a natural reaction to a deficiency in the cat's home environment. Or it may signal an underlying behavior problem. If one of the members of the household inadvertently always sneaks up on kitty, kitty may respond by becoming more short-tempered and aggressive. If a neighborhood tomcat starts hanging around outside the house and spraying, kitty may react by scratching more and taking out her frustration on humans or other animals in the household. In these and other cases where the scratching is a symptom of a physical or emotional condition it's necessary to determine and remedy the underlying cause. Declawing will likely only make things worse.

"My cat is happier now that I'm not harassing him for scratching."

Relying on amputation as a means to manage normal cat behaviors sets up a brute-force mindset and a potentially harmful precedent. What happens when kitty has a litter box problem? Worse, what if the declawing is a contributing factor to the litter box problem? The owner can't bring kitty in to the vet to amputate something and make the problem go away. He has to deal with the problem in a way that is in sync with the cat's needs. That takes some patience, perhaps some improvisation and a little detective work. Just like managing claws. This is precisely the point at which many declawed cats end up back at the shelter. Except now kitty is not a highly adoptable kitten any more. And he has a litter box problem. You know what fate awaits these shelter cats. Kitty is no longer "happier" as a result of his declawing. The solution to this conundrum is to start off with a more benign and informed approach to claw management in the first place.

"The reason that cats in Europe aren't declawed is because they all go outside."

The reason that cats in Europe aren't declawed is that declawing is rightly viewed by most Europeans as being inhumane and abusive, and is illegal in most of Europe. In any case, not all European cats go outdoors. And I'm sure that in Europe, just as in the US, there are lots of cats who would prefer the love seat in the living room even if they had access to a whole forest outside. In England and other countries outside the U.S. and Canada, most of the cats are kept indoors at night. The cat is in the house with the furniture for eight to twelve hours. When a cat feels like scratching, she doesn't think to herself, "well, I'll just wait until tomorrow morning and scratch outside." During inclement weather the English cat may be inside almost all day. The owner of an indoor/outdoor cat has to provide scratching posts and otherwise implement a sound and humane claw management policy just like the owner of an indoor cat. The indoor cats in Europe aren't declawed, either. This argument also implies that claws are used only for defense and only outdoor cats need claws. But as stated elsewhere in this article, claws are used for so much more, and all cats need them.

Cat-Friendly Claw Management Strategies

The first step in humane claw management is to rule out declawing. Commit to preserving your cat's claws. If you've already done that, you've made a good start.

Next, implement a three-pronged strategy:

- Accommodate your cats' scratching needs.
- Make the furniture, and your legs, unappealing scratching surfaces.
- Optionally, reduce claw damage through nail clipping or [SoftPaws](#).

There is an ever-expanding choice of tools, techniques, and support groups to help you accomplish those goals. I discuss them briefly here, but I highly recommend buying a good cat

care book to learn all about cat-friendly ways to deal with claws. [The New Natural Cat by Anitra Frazier](#) and [Think Like a Cat by Pam Johnson-Bennett](#) are two of my favorites; each devotes a whole chapter to claws. In addition, the Internet has a number of good sites on managing and peacefully coexisting with claws. (see [Resources](#))

Scratching Posts

Scratching posts are the base, literally and figuratively, of any claw management strategy. The importance of scratching posts cannot be overstated. Don't just go to the pet store, pick up a post, and plop it in the utility room. That won't work. Instead, put together a well-thought out and accommodating scratching environment, following the guidelines below. Your cat will thank you many times each day.

Types of Scratching Posts

Every house with a cat should have at least one classic vertical scratching post. Here's what to look for: the post should be sturdy, with a large or heavy base. It should be at least 28" tall, so kitty can do a full stretch, claws anchored high up on the post. The scratching surface should provide resistance to claws being pulled through. Sisal, bare wood, or tightly-woven carpet are good choices. Actually the best material is "all of the above"; most cats like to sink their claws into a variety of textures.

A floor-to-ceiling, multi-tier cat tree is more than a scratching post, it's an all-purpose kitty playground. It costs a bundle but lasts ten years or more and pays for itself in improved health for your cats and more fun for everyone. It makes a great "birthday" or adoption anniversary present.

For my money, there is no better value than a cardboard scratching post. It's impossible to have too many of these. You can pick up three Cosmic Catnip Alpine Scratchers (my cats' all-time favorite) from almost any pet supply store for about the price of a parking ticket, and they're a lot more fun. Rub some catnip on the posts, then sit back and watch kitty go to town. The more, the merrier. Put them everywhere.

An even better bargain, perhaps: just buy the refills to the cardboard scratchers. I recently laid two of them next to each other in a low-sided cardboard box; I've never seen my cat scratch more enthusiastically. Total cost: \$16.

Free is not a bad price for a decent scratching post. A tree stump is the original scratching post and works as well as ever. A piece of wood or the back of a carpet remnant makes a perfectly acceptable scratching target; your cat will confirm this. You can also make your own cardboard scratchers from corrugated cardboard boxes; all you need is a pair of scissors and some spare time (or do it while you're watching television).

If you're handy with wood, you can build superb posts for a fraction of the cost of buying them. The Internet has plans and tips (see [Resources](#)).

Location

Cats prefer to scratch on something handy, not two rooms over. Liberally place scratching posts and pads in the areas where your cat spends the most time.

Cats like to scratch when they make their grand entrance into a room, so put some posts near between-room passages.

If kitty is already scratching the couch, position a scratching post directly in front of where he's scratching, and temporarily cover the couch with a sheet or double-sided tape. The post needs to be sturdy and tall, and have a rough, couch-like texture, to give the couch some serious competition. Once your inveterate scratcher starts using this post regularly, you can *slowly* (a few inches a day) move it to its permanent location. (Or leave it.)

If your cat is ignoring a perfectly good scratching post, move it over two feet; sometimes, for reasons known only to the cat, that makes all the difference. Cats' diversity never ceases to amaze me. Your cat may scratch to the beat of a different drummer, preferring shaky, plush carpet-covered posts in remote locations. Occasionally you have to go "counterintuitive."

Use incentives to make the scratching posts more enticing. Sprinkle some catnip on them. Semi-hide a toy on top. Scrape your nails on the post, and say, "let's scratch!"

Slipcovers

It's amazing how often this incredibly effective and low-tech technique is overlooked. Cover the furniture so kitty can't scratch it. It's almost too easy.

Sofa Savers

SofaSavers are clear hard plastic protectors for your sofa or chairs. The Sofa Saver has a flat piece that goes under the furniture and is held in place by the weight of the furniture, so there are no nails or Velcro or anything. The plastic protects the furniture, and the Sofa Saver is inconspicuous, almost invisible.

Clipping Claws

Snipping the last quarter-inch or so from your cat's claws gets rid of the barbed end, greatly reducing any scratching damage, but still letting your cat be a cat. Kittens warm up to claw-clipping fairly easily. With adult cats, you need to work up to it. Most pet supply stores sell trimmers made especially for cat claws. Several books and Internet sites have detailed instructions on how to trim your cat's claws; read these before trying it at home. You can also delegate the task to your vet or groomer.

SoftPaws®

Another great product, and I wish every vet clinic in the country prominently displayed the SoftPaws brochure in the lobby. SoftPaws are vinyl nail covers that fit over your cat's claws. They last about 4-6 weeks, and replacing them is easy. They save thousands of cats a year from being declawed, and look nice, too.

Deterrents

Make the armchair, the armoire, and your arms undesirable scratching places, from your cat's point of view. Don't rely on deterrence alone as a claw management strategy. It *must* be combined with accommodation. The main focus must be on meeting your cat's scratching needs, not inhibiting them.

Not all deterrents work on every cat. One cat may be startled by a squirt gun, another may ignore it, and another may be traumatized by it. If a deterrent is ineffective or scary, don't use it.

Make sure your cat associates the deterrent with the scratching, not with you. If your cat knows that it's you squirting him, he may come to fear you or be angry with you; you don't want either scenario.

Be consistent. If you don't want kitty scratching the couch, don't give him mixed signals by sometimes letting him scratch it.

Popular disincentives include: squirt guns, [Sticky Paws](#) (wide double-sided tape strips), saying "no" in your moderately loud "bad kitty" voice, clapping hands, and the "pennies in a soda can" trick (fill an empty soda can with pennies, tape the lid shut, and place the can precariously on the edge of the couch; when kitty jumps on the couch, the soda can falls off, making a loud crash).

Common-Sense Play

Don't use your hand as a toy; that gives a confusing message to your cat and invites scratching. Use toys that let kitty scratch to his heart's content—at a safe distance from you. If you have a cat who does use his claws in play, Anitra Frazier recommends the following: "Just stop dead and relax toward him and disengage the claws, unhooking them by pushing the feet forward, never pull away. Then immediately put the offending [cat] gently but firmly away from you with words of deep disappointment. Do not become excited in any way or raise your voice; you want to put a big damper on all exuberance or emotion. Then ignore the [cat] for at least three minutes." (From [The New Natural Cat](#).) [Editor's Note: This approach may seem overly simplistic, but I used it

successfully to train Harlequin not to use her claws in play, which her previous owner had apparently allowed--perhaps one reason she ended up as a rescue cat.]

Tolerance

Tolerance is indeed part of humane claw management. One has to be realistic about living with an animal. Your cat makes decisions and mistakes; he has moods; he reacts to fear or perceived danger; he gets excited. Just like anyone. Sometimes he's capricious--that's part of his charm. He has an inalienable need to scratch; he can't turn it off. Accept the inevitability of your cat occasionally scratching "out of bounds." Never permanently disfigure him for doing so. Understand your cat's motivation for using his claws. Apply humane and reasonable remedies for scratching infractions. Be sympathetic. Let him keep his toes. Part of being a responsible caretaker for your cat is having tolerance for his innate, natural behaviors.

Claws: An Integral Part of the Whole Cat

All cats are born with claws. Cats enjoy having claws; no cat with claws decides for even one day not to use them. All cats are pro-claw. We should respect that. Claws are an integral part of daily cat life. Cats use claws for dozens of tasks, the most prominent of which is scratching. Cats need to scratch every day, and they require claws to do it.

A cat's retractable claws are not external appendages. They're part of the cat's basic framework, and the supporting muscles and tendons are part of the cat's basic anatomy. In other words, claws are standard equipment on The Whole Cat. The fact that a major excavation is required to separate the claws from the rest of the cat's body is a giant warning flag saying "Don't remove these unless absolutely necessary!"

Cats can't talk, but they can certainly communicate. Every time a cat takes a step and walks on her entire paw, including the last joint, it's an indication that she prefers to have the whole paw, not just part of it. Every time she reaches way up on her post, extends her claws, and makes that joyful noise, she's telling us that she likes her claws. No cat should be deprived of such magnificently designed, versatile tools.

Fill your home with scratching posts and scratching pads. Use slipcovers, nail caps, claw trimmers, and gentle deterrents when necessary to humanely manage your cat's claws. Avail yourself of the information sites and discussion groups on the Internet. Praise your cat enthusiastically when he uses his post. Compliment him on his strong shoulders and back, kept in shape from his daily scratching workouts. Enjoy watching your cat enjoy his claws.

Taking the Initiative

There are several groups working to help educate owners and reduce declawing.

www.declaw.com is a recently launched online directory of veterinarians who never or almost never declaw. Those in the latter category only perform the surgery under duress, after repeated attempts to talk a client out of declawing fail and it becomes painfully apparent that the client is determined to declaw despite being educated on all the risks and alternatives. Each of the veterinarians on www.declaw.com is unalterably opposed to declawing; none treats it as a routine procedure or include as part of a spay/neuter package. The main goals of the site are to help pro-claw cat owners locate a like-minded veterinarian, and to steer cat owners in general toward veterinary clinics that won't chop their cat's toes off. Nominate vets to be added to the list by visiting <http://www.declaw.com/>.

Resources

Declawing Sites

de-clawing.com -- a directory to all the declawing sites on the Internet; a good starting point for research.

stopdeclaw.com -- a powerful anti-declaw site.

declawing.com -- veterinarian Christianne Schelling describes declawing in plain English.

declaw.com -- a list of non-declaw veterinarians.

Scratching Products

softpaws.com -- nail caps that limit scratching damage but let your cat retain full claw movement. Ask your vet about them.

stickypaws.com -- humane and effective furniture protection. Their motto is "Don't declaw . . . Get Sticky Paws."