

# Cat: Declawing



Cats are loved for their companionship, playfulness, and gentle love they provide to a home. However, when people and cats live together, some natural feline behaviors can lead to destruction and injury to cat guardians and their property: a new couch being shredded or a child getting scratched by a playful kitten.

## What Are Claws Used For?

First of all, it is important to understand a little bit about the physiology of the paw and claws. The paws are the basic framework of the anatomy of cats' legs. In their entirety, including the toes, they support the muscles, tendons, and entire body, and they help the cat balance. The footpads contain scent glands, and the claws contain blood vessels and nerves. Cats' claws are used in a variety of ways. Scratching is a normal and natural activity for cats, which they perform for many reasons:

- **Stretching and Exercise:** Perhaps most importantly for a cat, scratching is a satisfying way for them to stretch and tone their back and shoulder muscles—it feels good!
- **Grooming:** Cats need their claws to “scratch that itch!”
- **Play and Hunting:** The claws are an important tool in catching prey or toys.
- **Climbing:** Cats love to perch in high places and climb, be it up a tree or to the top of a cat condo.
- **Kneading:** When a cat rhythmically moves her paws on people, clothing or bedding, she is “kneading.” This is generally a sign of contentment
- **Marking Territory:** Scratching leaves a visual and scent cue to other cats that this location has already been claimed by another feline.
- **Defense:** Cats use their claws to protect themselves. They may use their claws with humans when frightened or irritated.
- **Stress Relief:** Cats often resort to scratching after a stressful event, such as a negative interaction with another animal or person. This behavior is often wrongfully interpreted as the cat being “spiteful” or “getting back at the owner.”

**Claws grow and need shedding and trimming.** Claws have layers of skin similar to the layers of an onion. The claw itself is an extension of the cat's skin. The outer layer of the claw tissue is continually growing and must be removed to accommodate new growth. When a cat digs into a scratching surface, you will see the old nail coverings they have loosened nearby.

**Starting out right.** In order to provide the proper care for your cats to avoid problems with scratching, refer to the following handouts:

- Using a Scratching Post
- Claw Clipping (the SF SPCA offers a claw clipping clinic; call 415-554-3030 for more details)
- Play Aggression

Many cat guardians are not fully aware or informed as to what declaw surgery entails. Often the surgery is misrepresented as “just removing the claws” or as some variation of nail trimming. In actuality declawing is the cutting and amputating of the first joint (the toes) of a cat's paw.

The procedure is done under general anesthesia, which always carries risks, depending on the health of the animal. After declawing surgery, cat's paws are bandaged tightly. Most cats are held for a few days at the veterinary office after surgery for pain management. Cats must be

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restricted from jumping or exercising during the healing process and there may be problems with bleeding or infection. Declawed cats must be kept indoors since they cannot defend themselves or climb for escape if need be. When the behavior of declawed cats is compared with that of cats in control groups, some declawed cats develop litter box problems after the surgery.

AVMA mission statement on declawing:

<https://www.avma.org/News/JAVMANews/Pages/030415c.aspx>

From a welfare standpoint, keep in mind that many countries including England, Turkey, Germany, Brazil, Norway, Sweden, Ireland, Switzerland, Italy, and Australia do not allow declawing; it is illegal. It is classified as “mutilation” and considered inhumane.

We are committed to helping owners solve problem behaviors using methods that are effective and humane. Please contact SPCA behavior services.

**Declawing as means to stop aggression.** Declawing will not eliminate aggressive behavior because it does not address the cause of the aggression. In some cases, it may even make aggressive behavior worse because the cat knows her defenses are weakened. A cat that has been declawed may then turn to biting more aggressively. Aggression in cats may take many forms and should be addressed appropriately and humanely when it arises. Declawing is rarely a solution for treating aggression.

**Alternatives to declawing.** Given the reasons for declawing, it needs to be said that both furniture scratching and aggressive behavior can be addressed and solved when pet guardians are willing to take the steps necessary to modify both the behavior of their cat and their own behavior.

Consider Soft Paws: these are colorful rubber sheaths slip over your cat’s nails to protect your furniture without harming your cat. They can be applied at most veterinary clinics or can be purchased in a take-home kit. They last until the end of the nail breaks off, usually two to three months.