



AAFP POSITION STATEMENTS

Declawing

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The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) strongly believes it is the obligation of veterinarians to provide cat owners with complete education about and alternatives to feline onychectomy. Declawing is highly controversial and client education about all options often provides clients with good alternatives.

Scratching is a normal feline behavior. It is a means for cats to mark their territory both visually and with scent, and is used for claw conditioning ('husk' removal) and stretching activity. It is important for cat owners to understand that scratching is a normal behavior, and that it can be directed to areas that owners consider appropriate. The following steps should be taken to prevent destructive clawing and are alternatives to declawing:

- (1) Owners should provide suitable implements for normal scratching behavior. Examples are scratching posts, cardboard boxes, and lumber or logs. Many cats prefer vertical scratching posts, long enough or tall enough to allow full stretching, and firmly anchored to provide necessary resistance to scratching. Scratching materials preferred by most cats are wood, sisal rope, and rough fabric. Since cats often stretch and scratch upon awakening, the posts should be placed next to where the cat sleeps. Kittens and cats can be trained to scratching posts, by enticing the cat to the post with catnip, treats or toys, and rewarding behavior near or on the scratching post. If the cat scratches elsewhere, the cat should be picked up gently and taken to the scratching post, and then rewarded. Cats should be positively reinforced and never punished.
- (2) Appropriate claw care includes trimming the claws to prevent injury or undesired damage to household items. Proper utensils should be used to prevent splintering of the nails. Frequency of nail trimming varies, but may be as frequent as every 1-2 weeks in kittens. Trim nails in a calm environment, with positive reinforcement for the cat.
- (3) Temporary synthetic nail caps are available as an alternative to onychectomy to prevent human injury or damage to property. Plastic nail caps are usually applied every 4–6 weeks.

Onychectomy or surgical declawing is a highly controversial procedure. It is not a medically necessary procedure for the cat in most instances. While rare in occurrence, there are inherent risks and complications with any surgical procedure including, but not limited to, anesthetic complications, hemorrhage, infection, pain, and side effects of pain medications.

The surgical alternative of tendonectomy can cause deleterious results due to the overgrowth of nails, the need for more extensive claw care to be provided by the owner, and the development of discomfort in some patients. Consequently, the surgical alternative of tendonectomy is not recommended.

Because property destruction and human injury less commonly occurs from the claws on the rear feet, four-paw declaws are not recommended.

The AAFP reviews scientific data and supports controlled scientific studies that provide insight into all aspects of feline medicine. The AAFP recognizes that feline onychectomy is an ethically controversial procedure; however, there is no scientific evidence that declawing leads to behavioral abnormalities or chronic medical problems. Physically, regardless of the method used, onychectomy causes a higher level of pain than spays and neuters. Patients may experience both adaptive and maladaptive pain; in addition to inflammatory pain, there is the potential to develop long-term neuropathic or central pain if the pain is inadequately managed during the perioperative and healing periods.

Where scratching behavior is an issue determining whether or not a particular cat should remain as an acceptable household pet in a particular home situation, the decision to perform surgical onychectomy should be considered. Declawed cats should be housed indoors, or in properly constructed outdoor enclosures designed to protect the cat.

In households where cats come into contact with immunocompromised individuals, extensive education about zoonotic disease potential should be discussed and documented in the medical record. Surgical onychectomy is an appropriate option in such households.

If surgical onychectomy is performed, appropriate use of safe and effective anesthetic agents and the use of safe and effective peri-operative analgesics for an appropriate length of time are imperative. A multi-modal pain management strategy is



recommended. The AAFP believes that such pain management is necessary (not elective) and should be required for this procedure.