

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF FELINE PRACTITIONERS



# Claw Friendly

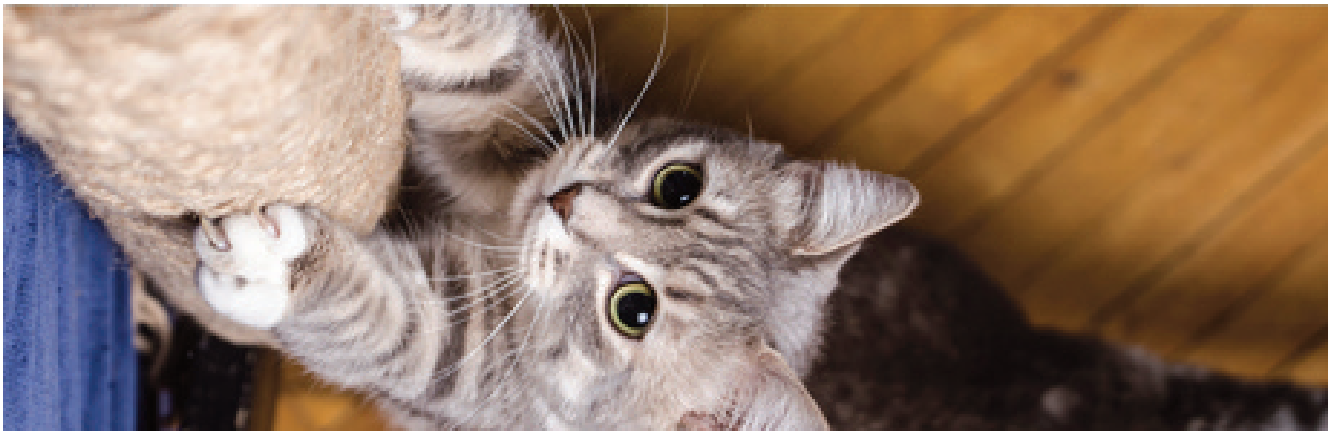
EDUCATIONAL TOOLKIT



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# Claw Friendly

## EDUCATIONAL TOOLKIT



This **Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit** was developed to support veterinary professionals by providing comprehensive and robust research and educational resources in one place. Scratching is a normal feline behavior and the AAFP strongly opposes declawing as an elective procedure, as stated in the 2017 Declawing Position Statement.

Guided by evidence-based information and the pursuit of leading the feline veterinary community, it is the AAFP's mission to improve the health and welfare of cats. As we continue to amplify our mission to support high standards of practice, continuing education, and evidence-based medicine, we are proud to announce the end of elective declawing procedures in our Cat Friendly Practices®.

There are many alternatives to declawing and the AAFP has developed supportive resources to assist veterinary teams and cat caregivers in being informed and living with clawed cats.

### Instructions for Use

This Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit contains in-depth information for veterinary professionals, practices, and clients. Read more about each area including: a review and summary of scientific literature, scratching educational resources, frequently asked questions from both client and veterinary practices, sample phone counseling scripts, sample practice implementation plans, real-life practice experiences, client resources, and more.

**This Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit is endorsed by**



## DECLAWING POSITION STATEMENT

## NEWS &amp; VIEWS

## AAFP Position Statement

## Declawing

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) strongly opposes declawing (onychectomy) as an elective procedure. It is the obligation of veterinarians to provide cat owners with alternatives to declawing. If owners are considering declawing, they must be provided with complete education about feline declawing, including the anatomic details of what a declaw entails (ie,

amputation of the third phalanx [P3]) and the importance of proper pain management. In addition, alternatives to surgery and the risks and benefits of surgery need to be discussed.

It is important that owners understand that scratching is a normal feline behavior; it is both inherited and learned.<sup>1</sup> The primary reason for scratching is to maintain the necessary claw motion used in hunting

and climbing.<sup>2</sup> In addition, it is done to re-establish claw sharpness via 'husk' (or 'sheath') removal and to stretch the body. Finally, it is an important means of visual and olfactory communication. Scratching can be directed to areas that owners consider appropriate. The following steps should be taken to prevent destructive scratching and are alternatives to declawing.

## Veterinarians should counsel owners to do the following:

❖ **Provide suitable implements ('scratchers') for normal scratching behavior.** Examples are scratching posts or pads, cardboard boxes, and lumber or logs. Scratchers may be vertical or horizontal. They should be tall or long enough to allow full stretching and stable enough so they do not move or fall over. Scratching materials preferred by cats include wood, sisal rope, carpet, cardboard and rough fabric. In one study, carpet-covered vertical scratchers were preferred.<sup>3</sup> Owners may need to experiment with a variety of textures and types of scratchers to determine one or more that their cat prefers.<sup>4</sup>

Stringent attention must be given to both location and suitability, otherwise the cat may choose other areas/objects that are desirable to them, but not to the owner.<sup>5</sup> Because cats often stretch and scratch upon awakening, a scratcher should be placed next to where the cat sleeps. It may also be effective to place a scratcher near the cat's preferred, yet undesirable scratching object (eg, the corner of a couch). In addition, access to the 'undesired' object needs to be temporarily denied by removing or covering/protecting it with a material that is aversive to the cat (eg, double-sided sticky tape, loose fabric, foil or plastic).<sup>3</sup> Kittens and cats can be trained to use scratchers by enticing the

cat to the item with catnip, treats or toys, and by rewarding behavior near or on the scratcher. If the cat scratches elsewhere, the cat should be picked up gently and taken to the scratcher, and rewarded. Cats should be positively reinforced and never punished.<sup>6</sup>



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❖ **Provide appropriate claw care by regularly trimming the claws** to prevent injury or damage to household items. Proper feline nail trimmers should be used to prevent splintering of the nails. Nail trimming frequency depends on the cat's lifestyle. Kittens, indoor-only and older cats will need more regular nail trims, whereas outdoor cats may naturally wear their nails and require less frequent trimming. Trim nails in a calm environment and provide positive reinforcement for the cat.<sup>6</sup>

❖ **Consider temporary synthetic nail caps**, which are available as an alternative to onychectomy (or surgical declawing). These caps are glued over the nails to help prevent human injury or damage to property. Nail caps usually need to be reapplied every 4-6 weeks.<sup>7</sup>

❖ **Consider using synthetic facial pheromone sprays and/or diffusers** to help relieve anxiety or stress.<sup>8</sup> Application of synthetic feline interdigital semiochemical (FIS) on the desired scratcher has been shown to induce scratching behavior on an appropriate target.<sup>2</sup> At the time of publication, FIS is available only in Europe; Feliway (Ceva) can be used instead in countries such as the US where FIS is not available. In addition, deterrent materials (eg, double-sided sticky tape, foil, plastic) may be placed on the undesired scratching object.

❖ **Provide appropriate feline environmental enrichment**, which must be implemented for successful behavioral modification.<sup>9</sup> Repetitive or increases in scratching behavior of indoor cats may be related to anxiety, stress, attention seeking, or lack of perceived security in their environment.<sup>2,5</sup> Anxiety can be exacerbated by owner punishment, thus driving the cat to increase scratching behavior in the same or other locations.<sup>5</sup>

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

Onychectomy is not a medically necessary procedure for the cat in

most instances. There are inherent risks and complications with this surgical procedure that increase with age.<sup>10</sup> These include, but are not limited to, the following: acute pain, hemorrhage, swelling, infection and nerve trauma.<sup>11</sup> Long-term complications include lameness, chronic draining tracts, retained P3 material leading to claw regrowth, development of palmigrade

stance, behavioral problems<sup>11</sup> and chronic neuropathic pain. Fewer than half of veterinary schools in the USA include a mandatory lecture or laboratory to teach this surgery. Lack of formal training in the procedure could lead to inferior surgical technique, thereby increasing the likelihood of both long- and short-term complications.<sup>10</sup>



## LITERATURE REVIEW AND SUMMARIES

**Categories:**

1. Onychectomy in Veterinary Practices: Surveys
2. Behavior Changes in the Declawed Cat
3. Methodology: Onychectomy Methods and Surgical Pain
4. Long-Term Concerns in the Declawed Cat

**1. Onychectomy in Veterinary Practices: Surveys**

**Ruch-Gallie R, Hellyer PW, Schoenfeld-Tacher R, et al. Survey of practices and perceptions regarding feline onychectomy among private practitioners. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2016; 249(3):291–298.**

This survey was conducted in 2014 and published in 2016. The survey was based on questions sent by email to members of the Veterinary Information Network (VIN), which were answered anonymously online by 10.4% of its members.

Seventy-two percent of respondents indicated that they were still performing onychectomy, with 61.4% of these respondents performing the procedure less than once per month. Over 74% of respondents who still performed onychectomy indicated that they were recommending non-surgical alternatives. Of the 24% of respondents who indicated that they no longer perform onychectomy, when asked to check all that apply, 81.9% stated it was against their personal beliefs or ethics, 19.3% never learned the procedure, 17.7% indicated there was no client demand for the service, 14.5% indicated it was prohibited by clinic policy, and/or 9.4% indicated it was prohibited by local or national law.

Of the veterinarians who were still performing onychectomy, 61% were opposed to a legislative ban, while 63% of veterinarians, who no longer perform onychectomy, supported a legislative ban. In a similar trend, 39.3% of veterinarians who were still performing onychectomy agreed that the procedure involves a great deal or quite a bit of pain, while 82.3% of veterinarians no longer performing onychectomy felt that the procedure did involve a great deal or quite a bit of pain. This survey confirmed that differences of opinion pertaining to legislation, level of pain, and general attitudes towards the procedure reflected the individual's own practice behavior. It also highlighted the decreasing frequency that onychectomy is performed, even in practices that still offer it, with a shift towards offering alternatives to the procedure.

**Why is this publication relevant?**

- While onychectomy was still being offered, demand for the procedure is decreasing, with procedures being performed less than once a month.

- When onychectomy was still being offered, an increasing number of veterinarians were recognizing the utility of offering alternatives to onychectomy, including resource management and behavioral modification.
- It highlights that with changing perceptions and a better understanding of feline scratching behavior, veterinarians are in the perfect position to stop declawing. Instead, we can take the time to guide our clients on how to train and live with clawed cats successfully.

**Wilson DV, Pascoe PJ. Pain and analgesia following onychectomy in cats: a systematic review. *Vet Anaesth Analg.* 2016;43(1):5–17.**

This publication constitutes a systematic review of existing, published studies that evaluated pain associated with onychectomy in cats. Twenty papers were evaluated in total, in which 12 analgesics were evaluated, with nine studies involving a direct comparison of analgesic agents. The goal of the review was to assess the efficacy of the analgesic therapies administered to attempt to identify optimal analgesia strategies for onychectomy. Criteria to measure pain varied from limb use to various pain scales to behavior assessment, with many studies highlighting the difficulties associated with assessing pain in cats. Physiological variables, such as heart rate, respiratory rate, and body temperature, were not found to be useful in assessment of analgesic efficacy. Additionally, none of the studies administering rescue analgesia reported reassessment of these patients outside of the time points of the study. No clearly superior analgesic treatment was identified, no single agent was found to be effective, and insufficient evidence exists to support the success or failure of a multimodal analgesic approach.

**Why is this publication relevant?**

- In reviewing 20 different studies, this systematic review highlighted the challenges that exist in truly assessing and understanding the degree of pain onychectomy patients are experiencing.
- With 20 studies assessing different analgesics, there has been no success in determining a suitable analgesic to meet the pain needs of onychectomy patients.
- The need for analgesia was observed as long as 12 days postoperatively, yet there are no studies assessing pain beyond this time frame, and most patients go without analgesia, sometimes immediately postoperatively and sometimes after only a few days of analgesia.



## LITERATURE REVIEW AND SUMMARIES

**2. Behavior Changes in the Declawed Cat**

**Martell-Moran NK, Solano M, Townsend HG. Pain and adverse behavior in declawed cats. J Feline Med Surg. 2018;20(4):280-288.**

This was a retrospective cohort study looking at 137 declawed and 137 non-declawed cats. Within each group, 88 were owned cats, and 49 were shelter cats. Cats with a previous history of trauma or congenital or developmental conditions were excluded from the study. The study assessed patients for behavior changes, including aggression, house soiling, and barbering, and also the presence or absence of back pain. The study also looked at the prevalence of P3 fragments in declawed patients and the relation of these to the four parameters. Onychectomy technique was taken into consideration. Declawed cats were found to have an increased risk of back pain (odds ratio [OR] 2.9), house soiling (OR 7.2), biting (OR 4.5), and barbering (OR 3.06). The presence of remaining P3 fragments further increased the risk of back pain and adverse behaviors. The age of the cat was not related to any of the outcomes. The authors concluded that onychectomy increases the risk of undesirable behaviors and may increase the risk for back pain regardless of surgical technique.

**Why is this publication relevant?**

- It is the first study to show behavior changes associated with being declawed.
- It is the first study to show an increased risk of back pain associated with being declawed.
- The study showed an increased risk of certain problem behaviors when fragments of P3 were left in situ.
- The problem behaviors noted were biting, house soiling, and barbering.
- Some or all of these behaviors most certainly can be linked to chronic pain. More studies are needed.

**Wilson C, Bain M, DePorter T, et al. Owner observations regarding cat scratching behavior: an internet-based survey. J Feline Med Surg. 2016;18(10):791-797.**

This internet-based survey was conducted to examine aspects of the cat, the environment, and scratching posts, and how these aspects might influence scratching behavior with the goal of using this information to assist in redirecting unwanted scratching behaviors in cats. The survey looked at the number and location of scratching surfaces, types of scratching substrates (e.g., rope, carpet, cardboard, wood), and the height and width of scratching

posts. The survey also examined the age and sex of the cat and whether these impacted undesirable scratching behaviors. Age was also examined as a factor in determining substrate preferences. Important points noted:

- Inappropriate scratching decreased as the different types/styles of posts increased in the home.
- The height, width, and base of a scratching post influenced use with a preference for two or more levels, upright structures, and structures taller than three feet (taller than the cat's stretched out height) with a narrower base (less than three feet).
- It is important to experiment with a variety of textures and types of scratchers to determine what a cat prefers. Cats nine years of age and under preferred rope>carpet>cardboard, while cats over nine years preferred carpet>rope>cardboard.
- Location is critical, and scratchers should be recommended in these areas:
  - Near the cat's sleeping areas (they often stretch or scratch when they wake up)
  - In areas where territory might be challenged (e.g., near entry doors, windows, feeding areas)
  - Multiple areas throughout the household
  - In living areas where humans spend time
- Punishment did not affect the frequency of inappropriate scratching, whereas positive reinforcement favorably impacted the use of desirable scratching surfaces.

**Why is this publication relevant?**

- This research provides valuable information about scratching preferences, which can assist owners in reinforcing desired scratching behaviors and redirecting unwanted scratching behaviors.

**DePorter TL, Elzerman AL. Common feline problem behaviors: Destructive scratching. J Feline Med Surg. 2019; 21(3):235-243.**

This publication is a review which looks at scratching behavior in cats. It explores the natural behavior of scratching and why cats scratch. The review examines treatment approaches for destructive scratching and provides tips for the use of appropriate scratching substrates, which substrates to use, and how to select them for each individual cat. The authors also discuss the use of synthetic feline pheromones to direct scratching behaviors. The review covers techniques to discourage the use of unwanted scratching on inappropriate substrates without the use of punishment, which can



## LITERATURE REVIEW AND SUMMARIES

**2. Behavior Changes in the Declawed Cat** *continued*  
increase anxiety and frustration. Onychectomy is presented, with the growing concern that the procedure is a significant welfare issue, which is coming under increased scrutiny as the long-term negative consequences of onychectomy are revealed. Alternative techniques to reduce damage to property from unwanted scratching behavior are presented, including application of plastic nail caps. A number of supplementary materials have been made available, including a valuable owner handout describing 'Strategies for reducing scratching by your cat.'

**Why is this publication relevant?**

- It provides valuable information on a natural feline behavior.
- It provides guidance on directing natural feline behavior to desired surfaces through provision of appropriate resources as well as behavioral modification.
- It provides options for positive reinforcement and the use of safe, humane alternatives to redirect scratching behavior.
- This is an excellent resource for veterinary professionals wanting to counsel their clients on scratching behaviors in cats.

**Cloutier S, Newberry RC, Animal ACA, et al. Behavioural signs of postoperative pain in cats following onychectomy or tenectomy surgery. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*. 2005;92(4):325–335.**

This study examined relative degrees of acute pain in cats postoperatively, comparing onychectomy, digital flexor tenectomy (DFT), and sham surgery (control) patients. All three groups underwent anesthesia, surgeries were performed by the same surgeon, and bandages were placed regardless of study group. The authors hypothesized that compared to onychectomy, DFT would be less painful in the immediate postoperative period. Pain was assessed starting 0.5 hours after surgery and continued for 35.5 hours postoperatively. Before and after surgery, criteria assessed as indicators of patient comfort, discomfort, or pain included: groom body, groom with forepaw, groom bandages, shake forepaw, wipe forepaw, stand/sit, lie on sternum, lie on side, manipulate toy with forepaw, hide under blanket, and drink. These criteria were assessed by an experienced, blinded observer. The authors concluded that bandages contribute to increased forepaw wiping, shaking, and lying on side, even in control cats. They

concluded that tendonectomy patients had similar pain signs to those cats that had been declawed, thus indicating that the procedure is no less painful.

**Why is this publication relevant?**

- It demonstrates that tendonectomy as an alternative approach to declawing does not cause less pain in the immediate postoperative period.
- It demonstrates that both cats undergoing tendonectomy and declawing experience pain in the immediate postoperative period, while control cats that underwent 'sham' surgeries did not.
- It demonstrates that the practice of bandaging paws postoperatively is in and of itself a source of discomfort and agitation to cats.

**Romans CW, Gordon WJ, Robinson DA, et al. Effect of postoperative analgesic protocol on limb function following onychectomy in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2005; 227(1):89–93.**

This prospective study directly compared limb function in cats post-onychectomy treated with either transdermal fentanyl, intramuscular butorphanol, or intraoperative topical bupivacaine. Limb function was determined by measuring peak vertical force (PVF), vertical impulse (VI), and PVF ratio at time periods before surgery and at 1, 2, 3, and 12 days after surgery. Patients in the study underwent unilateral onychectomy of the left forelimb only, allowing assessment of the right forelimb as a control. In all three groups, PVF, VI, and PVF ratios were significantly decreased compared to baseline values on the day after surgery. The narcotic treatments resulted in less impairment of limb function compared to intraoperative topical bupivacaine on day 2 postoperatively. Compared with baseline measurements, and regardless of analgesic protocol, cats continued to show significantly reduced limb function 12 days postoperatively. Measurements were not conducted beyond 12 days.

**Why is this publication relevant?**

- It confirms reduced limb function as a marker of pain directly related to onychectomy surgery.
- It reports continued reduced limb function regardless of the three analgesia protocols utilized.
- It demonstrates that reduced limb function in a declawed limb continued postoperatively up to and possibly beyond 12 days.



## LITERATURE REVIEW AND SUMMARIES

**3. Methodology: Onychectomy Methods and Surgical Pain**

**Robinson DA, Romans CW, Gordon-Evans WJ, et al. Evaluation of short-term limb function following unilateral carbon dioxide laser or scalpel onychectomy in cats. J Am Vet Med Assoc 2007; 230(3):353–358.**

**Holmberg DL, Brisson BA. A prospective comparison of postoperative morbidity associated with the use of scalpel blades and lasers for onychectomy in cats. Can Vet J 2006; 47(2):162–163.**

These studies compared post-onychectomy patient limb function in patients undergoing laser or scalpel onychectomy. Limb function was determined in the first study by measuring peak vertical force (PVF), vertical impulse (VI), and PVF ratio with patients having either declaw by laser or declaw by scalpel technique. In the second study, cats were monitored for lameness by trained but blinded observers, with one paw declawed by laser and one paw declawed by scalpel. In both studies, there were days postoperatively that the patient or paw subjected to scalpel declaw showed reduced limb function or increased evidence of lameness. However, both studies also documented days when no differences were noted between different study groups (patient or paw), with both groups suffering similar limb dysfunction or lameness. The studies did not look beyond 12 days (Robinson) and ten days (Holmberg), with limb dysfunction noted at 12 days for both groups and normal gait noted at ten days for both paws.

**Why are these publications relevant?**

- They documented pain as measured by limb function or lameness postoperative onychectomy up to and possibly beyond 12 days.
- They documented only single time points when patients declawed by laser experienced less reduction in limb function or reduced lameness.
- They documented some level of pain in all declaw patients, regardless of method used.

**4. Long-Term Concerns in the Declawed Cat**

**Cooper MA, Laverty PH, Soiderer EE. Bilateral flexor tendon contracture following onychectomy in 2 cats. Can Vet J. 2005; 46(3):244–246.**

**Cabon Q, Plante J, Gatineau M. Digital flexor tendon contracture treated by tenectomy: different clinical presentations in three cats. Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery Open Reports. July 2015.**

These studies identified a unique and under-diagnosed negative sequela of onychectomy: digital flexor tendon

contracture. All five patients were presented for thoracic limb lameness of variable duration, with onychectomy having been performed as early as three months and up to years prior. The patients were found to be painful, with mild to severe tension of the P1-P2 forelimb digits and reduced ability or inability to extend this joint. On further assessment, negative sequelae were found to include soft and bony tissue changes. Tendon histopathology revealed reactive fibroplasia with well-differentiated fibroblasts, small-caliber blood vessels, and thin collagen fibers. Radiographically, the joint angle of P1-P2 was frequently noted to be less than 90°. Successful treatment for all five patients involved tenectomy of the superficial and deep (Cabon) or deep digital flexor (Cooper) tendon(s), which resulted in release of the contracture and resolution of lameness.

**Why are these publications relevant?**

- They documented a previously unreported sequela of onychectomy.
- They documented a variable time frame to development of this sequela post-onychectomy, indicating that this condition may be more common in declawed cats as long-term monitoring for sequelae is rare.
- They provide information about a differential diagnosis for thoracic limb lameness.
- They provide criteria by which veterinarians should be monitoring declawed patients at every preventive care visit for evidence of tendon contraction.

**O'Hagan, BJ. Neuropathic pain in a cat post-amputation. Aust Vet J. 2006; 84(3):83-86.**

This case report describes a hindlimb amputee patient that presented clinical signs consistent with neuropathic or phantom limb pain (PLP) 38 days postoperatively. The patient had suffered a traumatic sciatic nerve injury 42 days prior, with subsequent limb amputation. The patient's clinical signs included hiding and urine house soiling. The patient was also described to be holding his stump in the air as though trying to shake the amputated limb. This pattern worsened over eight days, with the patient becoming lethargic and unable to take only a few steps before pausing to attempt to shake the stump and falling over. Treatment with amitriptyline did not resolve the concern. The patient was admitted for treatment for PLP, starting with induction to an initial anesthetic state, followed by constant rate infusion of morphine, lignocaine, and ketamine. This was continued for a total of 36 hours with ongoing



## LITERATURE REVIEW AND SUMMARIES

**4. Long-Term Concerns in the Declawed Cat** *continued*  
**O'Hagan, BJ. Neuropathic pain in a cat post-amputation.**  
**Aust Vet J. 2006; 84(3):83-86.** *continued*  
 transmucosal-buprenorphine and oral amitriptyline for 21 days. At discharge, the clinical signs had resolved and did not recur after 14 days, 21 days, or ten months post-amputation.

**Why is this publication relevant?**

- It is the first published case of possible PLP in a cat.
- It confirms that nerve damage can lead to clinical signs consistent with PLP.

- It should encourage us to look to all onychectomy patients for evidence of PLP: shaking of limbs, avoidance of digging in litter box, hiding, or any other abnormal, unexplained clinical sign or behavior.
- PLP in humans can occur immediately or years post-amputation, with signs being described as intermittent but occasionally constant. Signs include shooting, stabbing, or pricking pains that last for short periods. Onychectomy patients that suffer PLP may be overlooked as having other medical concerns as a result of the inconsistent pattern of PLP.

**FEATURED WEBINAR****Feline Onychectomy:  
What We Know and  
What We Don't Know**

*Dr. Kelly St. Denis, MSc, DVM, DABVP (Feline)*

**Complimentary Webinar****Feline Onychectomy: What We Know and What We Don't Know**

*Kelly St. Denis, MSc, DVM, DABVP (Feline)*

Onychectomy has always been a controversial topic, but over the last decade, a large push to end this practice has revived the controversy. Declawing is an emotionally charged issue, leading to much discussion on social media sites, in social settings, at conferences, and in the clinic. This presentation will provide a review of the current understanding of the surgical procedure known as 'declawing.' We will discuss the factors behind the desire for declaw, as well as the shift that is diminishing that demand. Surgical, short, and long-term risks will be reviewed. Given that much has yet to be learned about the long-term consequences of feline onychectomy, the presentation will also review applicable literature from other species undergoing similar surgical procedures.

**Webinar Objectives:**

- Gain an understanding as to why cats scratch
- Review the reasons why people have pursued onychectomy in the past
- Explore the short-term surgical risks of onychectomy
- Explore the long-term surgical risks of onychectomy
- Explore the long-term neurological side effects of amputation as it is understood in other species as well as in feline amputee patients

RACE approved: 1 CE Hour

VIEW WEBINAR: [www.catvets.com/onychectomy](http://www.catvets.com/onychectomy)



## SCRATCHING RESOURCES

The best method to advance feline welfare is through education. Many cat caregivers are unaware that scratching is a natural behavior for cats. The AAFP has created the educational resources below to assist your team in educating cat caregivers about why cats need to scratch, ideal scratching surfaces, troubleshooting inappropriate scratching, training cats to scratch appropriately in the home, and alternatives to declawing.

### Veterinary Professionals

#### Claw Counseling: Helping Clients Live Alongside Cats with Claws (In-depth Article)

This comprehensive article provides more detailed information to help you counsel clients on why and how to live with a clawed cat. It provides information about why clients declaw, short and long-term complications, what causes cats to scratch excessively and on unfavorable locations, and how to work through inappropriate scratching situations.

## CLAW COUNSELING:

### Helping clients live alongside cats with claws



*Submitted by Kelly A. St. Denis, MSc, DVM, DABVP (feline practice)*

Onychectomy has always been a controversial topic, but over the last decade, a large push to end this practice has been brought forward by many groups, including major veterinary organizations, such as the American Association of Feline Practitioners. As veterinary professionals, we may be asked about declawing, nail care, and normal scratching behavior in cats. Whether you are in a practice that still offers onychectomy or in a practice that does not, owners should be made aware that declawing is surgical amputation of the last toe bone, and that there are both short and long term side effects from this procedure, including acute and chronic pain, as well as behavior problems.<sup>1</sup> The most effective way to help clients is to comprehend normal scratching behavior in cats and to become well versed in normal scratching preferences.

Pulling this knowledge together, veterinary team members have the capacity to develop 'Claw Counseling' programs for their clinic that promote living in harmony with clawed cats. More than just understanding why declaw is not an acceptable procedure, 'Claw Counseling' is about moving forward in positive action by teaching clients that they can live in harmony with their clawed cat. Declawing is banned in dozens of countries world wide, and the majority of veterinarians in the US and Canada rarely declaw cats<sup>2-3</sup> so we know this is possible. How do we re-set thinking, and reduce the desire for and pursuit of onychectomy by cat owners? The best way is to provide support. This includes a comprehensive approach to nail care, meeting each cat's essential environmental needs and managing their resources. More information can be found in the AAFP/SFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines and the associated brochure provided for clients:

- [www.catvets.com/environmental-guidelines](http://www.catvets.com/environmental-guidelines)
- [www.catvets.com/environmental-brochure](http://www.catvets.com/environmental-brochure)

A brief word of advice: If you practice in a clinic that still

offers onychectomy, open dialogue about this is strongly encouraged. Team members should be mindful that these discussions should be approached with care and respect, for themselves and their employer. It is also extremely important to include front office staff in these discussions, as they may receive direct questions by phone.

#### Why do cats scratch?

The cat claw is unique anatomically, in that the claws of the forelimb are retractable, allowing the cat to expose or retract their claws as needed. A cat exposes its claws for several reasons. When hunting, the cat will use the claws to grasp prey. During times of conflict with other cats or other animals, the cat may use its claws to defend itself. Lastly, the claws will need to be exposed for the purpose of scratching inanimate objects for scent and visual marking. Outdoors this may include trees, fences and other solid surfaces. Indoors, it includes scratching posts (Figure 1) and other suitable scratching surfaces. However, if posts are not desirable to the cat, or if the cat is anxious or distressed, it may scratch furniture, doorframes, walls, or carpet. Scratching inanimate objects serves three main purposes. The first is to sharpen the claw by dislodging the old nail. The second purpose is for marking. In this latter case, the claws do not always need to be exposed. The cat is using the paw pads to mark surfaces with pheromones, in order to communicate its presence and



**Figure 1** Indecisive cats may scratch furniture, doorframes, walls, carpet and hopefully, their scratch post.

See next 7 pages for full size print version.

# CLAW COUNSELING:

## Helping clients live alongside cats with claws

Submitted by Kelly A. St. Denis, MSc, DVM, DABVP (feline practice)

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offers onychectomy, open dialogue about this is strongly encouraged. Team members should be mindful that these discussions should be approached with care and respect, for themselves and their employer. It is also extremely important to include front office staff in these discussions, as they may receive direct questions by phone.

### Why do cats scratch?

The cat claw is unique anatomically, in that the claws of the forelimb are retractable, allowing the cat to expose or retract their claws as needed. A cat exposes its claws for several reasons. When hunting, the cat will use the claws to grasp prey. During times of conflict with other cats or other animals, the cat may use its claws to defend itself. Lastly, the claws will need to be exposed for the purpose of scratching

inanimate objects for scent and visual marking. Outdoors this may include trees, fences and other solid surfaces. Indoors, it includes scratching posts (Figure 1) and other suitable scratching surfaces. However, if posts are not desirable to the cat, or if the cat is anxious or distressed, it may scratch furniture, doorframes, walls, or carpet. Scratching inanimate objects serves

three main purposes. The first is to sharpen the claw by dislodging the old nail. The second purpose is for marking. In this latter case, the claws do not always need to be exposed. The cat is using the paw pads to mark surfaces with pheromones, in order to communicate its presence and



**Figure 1** Indoors, cats may scratch furniture, doorframes, walls, carpet and hopefully, their scratch post.

ownership of territory to other cats. Scratch marks also communicate visual markers of territory. Cats also scratch after waking from sleep as a means of stretching out the limbs. It is important to understand these behaviors, as they are natural and necessary to the cat. As a territorial behavior, increased scratching and marking may occur in times of anxiety and stress, including inter-cat conflict or when environmental resources are threatened or restricted.<sup>4</sup> Identification of the cause of the anxiety or stress is likely to offer solutions that will lead to a reduction in the unwanted marking behavior.

## Why do clients declaw?

While some cat owners are opposed to declawing, others are not educated about the procedure and the alternatives. The primary reason that cat owners decide to declaw is to protect furniture and belongings from the damage caused by scratching (Figure 2). Parents of young children may feel that they need to declaw their cat in order to protect their families from cat scratches.<sup>5</sup> Clients may also be trying to protect sick and/or elderly family members.<sup>4</sup> Clients may cite the transmission of disease through cat scratches as a reason for declawing. There may be cats in the house that were previously declawed and the client may feel that it is not 'fair' to the declawed cats to have to live with a clawed cat. So what are the realities when it comes to cats and scratching? How real are any of the above arguments?

If properly trained, cats can learn not to scratch items such as furniture, door jams, doors and walls. With the provision of ample environmental resources, including scratching surfaces, this is less likely to be an issue. Adjustment of environments to address inter-cat competition for resources and inter-cat aggression will also reduce this favorably. Protecting children and family members from cat scratches is accomplished through proper handling of the cat, avoiding rough play and trimming the nails regularly. Children should be taught to treat their cat with respect and to play with the cat with an interactive toy. Hands, fingers, toes, and feet should never be used as "toys," as this may give a signal to the cat that it is "OK" to scratch and/or bite human flesh. Young children should have adult supervision when interacting with an animal.



**Figure 2** The primary reason that cat owners decide to declaw is to protect furniture and belongings from the damage caused by scratching. Photo courtesy of Dr. Karol Matthews.

Diseases that can be transmitted via scratches include cat-scratch fever (*Bartonella henselae*). This bacteria is carried by fleas and transmitted via blood. In infected or carrier cats, the bacteria can be found on the claws, posing a risk of infecting humans. Declaw is not an acceptable method of preventing transmission of Cat Scratch Fever, nor does the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommend it to prevent the transmission of Cat Scratch Fever. The CDC does not recommend declawing to protect immune compromised people. Instead, the CDC and veterinarians recommend regular nail trims, regular flea prevention, and avoiding rough play with cats. Owners should be educated to use an interactive toy and never to play with their hands, or by wiggling hands or feet.

Lastly, existing declawed cats are not at a major disadvantage in the presence of clawed cats. Attention to resource management and addressing any inter-cat issues as they arise is the best means to maintaining harmony. Fights between cats should always be of concern, regardless of whether cats are declawed. It is easy to see that the many arguments presented as reasoning for pursuing declaw are

unfounded. Discussing these and informing clients of appropriate recommendations is key. For many clients, once the realities of the surgery are explained, and once they understand there are ways to live in harmony with clawed cats, their desire to pursue declaw diminishes greatly.

## What is a declaw surgery?

It is important for the veterinary team to recognize that many clients do not understand the surgical procedure of onychectomy. Frequently the procedure is not explained in detail, and many clients have a notion of 'magical' removal of the nail only. Clients need to understand that the surgery involves removal of the third phalanx of each digit, and that surgically this is classified as an amputation. They need to be aware that during the procedure a piece of each digit is surgically removed. They need to understand that skin, nerves, tendons and other soft tissues are cut during the surgery. Clients that do not understand the surgical procedure may be very upset after the fact, when they discover what they have agreed to do to their cat. In the author's experience, many clients with declawed cats have indicated that had they understood what was involved, they would not have proceeded. This is particularly upsetting for them when their cats are experiencing short and/or long term complications from the declawing surgery. As veterinary professionals, we all need to be forthcoming about what is actually being done to a cat during a surgical procedure, the level of acute pain associated with surgery, as well as the potential for chronic pain. Declawing causes more acute pain than most other surgical procedures because it involves surgical manipulation of bone. Have an open dialogue with your entire veterinary team so that your procedures are clearly laid out for all, including who will explain what declaw entails, alternatives to declawing, and normal scratching behaviors to clients.

## What are the short and long-term complications?

Although all surgical procedures deliver some level of pain, onychectomy is a highly painful surgical procedure. Until relatively recently, there was a lack of awareness of the high level of acute pain and the potential for chronic pain with

onychectomy, despite the use of perceived adequate analgesia. During the amputation, soft tissue is cut, including skin, nerves, blood vessels, tendons and joint capsules. In some cases paw pads and bone tissue may be erroneously cut. Some patients have had the distal ends of P2 incised by accident, and rare patients may have damage to both P2 and P1. Veterinarians may leave fragments of P3 in situ and some



*Have an open dialogue with your entire veterinary team so that your procedures are clearly laid out for all, including who will explain what declaw entails, alternatives to declawing, and normal scratching behaviors to clients.*

veterinarians leave these fragments, not recognizing the pain risks, potential for abnormal growth of the nail or the potential for infection. Hemorrhage is a risk with most surgical methods. Although laser decreases the risk of hemorrhage, tissue burns may occur. It is important to note that while laser declaw may slightly reduce short term post-operative discomfort, studies have shown that after 3-5 days, there is no difference in the level of pain between cats declawed by laser or by other methods.<sup>6,7</sup> Post-operative bandaging compromises blood flow and could lead to permanent damage of the blood-deprived limb. Suture materials and tissue adhesives may act as foreign body irritants. Postoperatively, declawed cats are at risk for hemorrhage, infection, wound dehiscence, reaction to closure material (suture or tissue adhesives), neurological pain, pain from P3 fragments and generalized post-operative pain. Any of these short-term issues may predispose to long-term chronic debilitation and pain.

Long-term issues include arthritis and osteomyelitis of the remaining digit, P3 remnant pain, P3 remnant regrowth and/or tendon contracture.<sup>8,9,10</sup> As amputees, it is almost certain that some portion of these cats experience phantom amputee pain at some point in their lives post onychectomy. Phantom pain can occur as many as 10 years after amputation in humans, so it is realistic to expect that cats may develop this type of pain in the years following surgery.<sup>11</sup> In relation to some of these long-term problems, it is hypothesized that some cats may experience discomfort digging in cat litter, and therefore may house soil; others may become aggressive due to pain related to ambulation and/or handling.<sup>3</sup>

## What causes cats to scratch excessively and/or inappropriately?

First and foremost, cats scratch to mark territory. Anything that is occurring in a cat's life that may pose a threat to their territory can be expected to result in an increase in territorial marking.<sup>4</sup> Behavioral consultations for scratching that owners consider 'inappropriate' should include very thorough questioning about the environment. The presence of other pets in the home should lead to a complete evaluation of inter-cat and cat-dog issues. The client should be questioned about the presence of outdoor animals, particularly cats, as these may be a stressor for their cat. As such, the indoor cat will begin to mark their territory more often and potentially in an increased number of locations. Frequent comings and goings of adults and teenagers, as well as the presence of children, will disturb the cat's environment. New furniture, renovations and other dramatic changes will act as a disturbance to the cat. It is less than ideal if there are any changes in the cat's day-to-day schedule of feeding, sleeping, and play. Anxieties can arise from any of these disturbances. Cats that are not well stimulated mentally will also be more inclined to mark territory. Use of scheduled play-time, as well as feeding toys and other puzzles will be beneficial in keeping the mind stimulated and boredom minimized.<sup>12</sup> Behavioral consultations should work through all of these possibilities, in order to identify all possible problems.

Resource management in a multi-pet environment is critical to reducing territorial anxiety in cats. While litter box resources are often considered during house soiling consultations, these represent only one facet of household resources that are important to indoor cats:

- Litter boxes
- Sleeping and resting areas
- Food
- Water
- Appropriate toys and interactive play
- Perches
- Scratch posts
- Scratching surfaces
- Human attention if desired

Litter boxes should be provided at a ratio of ~1 litter box per cat plus one additional box. The boxes should not be located

in the same space, and not all on the same level of the house. Suitable box size unscented clumping sand litter substrate and uncovered boxes should be used. A minimum of once daily scooping of the boxes is necessary, with complete cleaning every 1-4 weeks.

Sleeping and resting locations should be ample to accommodate all cats in a variety of locations. Most cats do not wish to sleep close to other cats, which means that there should be sleeping and resting locations for each cat and these should be distributed widely throughout the household. When environments are stressful (multiple cat households where cats don't show social bonding – grooming and resting touching one another), places to hide are important. Good options are high sided or igloo cat beds or boxes with the opening placed on a side.

Some of the scratch posts and perches should be located near windows to allow the cat to visualize outdoor activities such as birds and squirrels. This is mentally stimulating for the cat. In cases where outdoor cats or animals are causing territorial anxiety, the yard view may need to be blocked temporarily. Other scratching surfaces should be located near sleeping spots, so that the cat that wishes to scratch and stretch after a nap has immediate access to an acceptable scratching surface. Placing scratching surfaces in both busy and quiet areas of the household, with multiple locations to scratch is helpful for cats that routinely enjoy the human family. For most cats, catnip and catnip spray should help to encourage use of these articles. It is important to note that most kittens under four months of age will not respond to catnip and some adult cats are actually non-responders.

Food can be a major source of anxiety in multi-cat households. Ideally, cats should be fed 3-4 meals a day, and within separate rooms. Cats fed within visual, olfactory and/or auditory distance of each other may actually experience anxiety as they eat. This may not be obvious to the client, as signs can be subtle. This can lead to increased food consumption as well as rapid food intake, neither of which are beneficial to the cat. The client should ensure that one cat is not bullying the other cat away from its food. Water bowls need to be distributed throughout the household as well. Toys should be ample in number, with types of toys being rotated every week if at all possible.



**Figure 3** The client should provide a number of substrates including sisal rope, natural bark or wood, corrugated cardboard, and carpet.

## What is the ideal scratching surface?

The answer to this question may be as individual as the cat. However, in a recent study, most cats 9 years of age and younger preferred sisal rope to other scratching substrates.<sup>4</sup> There was a slight preference in cats 10 and older for carpet, then followed by sisal rope. Whereas some recommend offering a wide variety of options, others recommend starting with sisal rope and inexpensive cardboard scratchers. To provide multiple options, the client should provide substrates including sisal rope, natural bark or wood, corrugated cardboard and carpet/rough fabric (Figure 3). Scratching posts should be placed in a wide variety of locations, and include both vertical and horizontal options. Use of scratching posts and sisal rope as the preferred substrate increased with a higher number of posts within the home.<sup>4</sup> Vertical options must be sturdy and extend above the cat's stretched out vertical height. An internet based-survey on feline scratching behaviors noted the ideal scratch post was found to be a simple upright structure with 2-3 levels, at least 3 feet tall.<sup>4</sup> A list of recommended scratch substrates, surfaces and their locations should be provided and discussed with the client. Provision of additional surfaces and structures will need to be considered when insufficient options are available.

## What are alternatives to declawing?

As we work with clients to teach them about the reasons for opposition to onychectomy, we also need to move forward with them in a positive manner, teaching them how to live in harmony with a clawed cat. Clinics may wish to provide regular nail trims at a discounted rate or for free. The client may wish to learn how to trim nails, and may need some assistance in this, as well as how often to do this and how to approach nail trims with their individual cat (Figure 4). Nail trimming should be conducted according to feline friendly handling techniques. Instruct clients to trim a few nails at a time as opposed to all nails at once to prevent struggling and other difficulties. Emphasize the need for practice and patience, as well as to start slow, offer breaks, and make it a familiar routine. Distract with and encourage the use of positive reinforcement with food rewards. Some clients are very adept at learning clicker training for their cats, which may be very helpful.



**Figure 4** The client may wish to learn how to trim nails, and may need some assistance in this, as well as how often to do this and how to approach nail trims with their individual cat.

The application of temporary synthetic nail caps is an alternative that may appeal to some clients and works well for some cats (Figure 5). This is not for every patient, as some resent the application process, and some will remove all of the caps in a short amount of time. Clients may learn to apply caps on their own, or the clinic may offer this as a service to their clients.



**Figure 5** The application of temporary synthetic nail caps is an alternative that may appeal to some clients and works well for some cats.

Surgical tenectomy has been performed as an alternative to declawing but is no longer recommended. The procedure prevents extraction of the claws by surgical resection of a fragment of the deep digital flexor tendon. As a result of not being able to extract their claws, cats are unable to scratch



**Figure 6** Cats that have been subjected to tenectomy will be unable to extract their claws, resulting in an inability to scratch away the rough old claw surface. A thick, abnormal nail then develops.

away the rough old claw surface. A thick, abnormal nail then develops (Figure 6) which is painful to walk with and painful to trim. These cats still require nail trims, which become more challenging than normal nail trims because of the painful, thick claws.

## Claw Counseling

We need to be available for our clients to provide

support as we advocate for the cat and its claws. Perhaps your client wants to prepare in advance of obtaining a cat, adding a cat to the household or wanting to train their cat or kitten. Perhaps your client is experiencing new challenges that were not previously present. A designated individual, or all team members, should become actively involved in 'Claw Counseling.' 'Claw Counseling' refers to a consultation whereby we address the situation, including sources of feline anxiety (recent and long-term), current resources (all resources, not just scratching posts), how to trim nails and/or apply temporary synthetic nail caps and how to train cats to scratch only surfaces clients consider undesirable.

Punishment in any form can increase the anxiety of the cat, potentially increasing scratching and other marking behaviors, and causing them to be fearful of people. We need to keep this in mind when discussing scratching of undesirable surfaces with our clients. Discussing where the cat is scratching furniture may help reveal what the threat is that is making the cat feel the need to reinforce territorial markings. Similarly, it may also indicate the optimal locations for cat scratching posts and other acceptable surfaces. The placement of two-sided sticky tape, tinfoil, plastic, or furniture covers may reduce scratching on surfaces owners want protected. Cats that like to chew plastic should not have access to that type of surface cover.

If the cat has selected several surfaces that the client does not wish to have scratched, an attempt can be made to make these surfaces less desirable. Any changes should not cause pain to or encompass punishment of the cat. There are

scratch surfaces available commercially that can be mounted on the arms of couches allowing cats to scratch these instead of the actual couch. Scratchers can also be placed in front of the object to redirect the scratching. Some changes may not be 'tasteful' to the client, but we need to help them to understand that the room must meet both theirs and their cat's needs.

Enticing the cat or kitten to scratching surfaces using food, treats, catnip, or play is always recommended (Figure 7). If the cat has always had a preference for a particular piece of furniture, and the client has allowed it, replacement with a new piece of furniture is not recommended, as it is likely that the cat will commence scratching the new piece of furniture.

Onychectomy has been listed as an medically unnecessary surgery.<sup>13</sup> The procedure is fraught with short and long term post-operative consequences.

Suffering may go unnoticed, or subsequent pain related behaviors such as house soiling can lead to

relinquishment of the cat.<sup>5,8</sup> There are a myriad of ways that we can support and encourage clients to live with clawed cats. As veterinary professionals we have the knowledge to discuss the impact of declawing, and positively support the client through the process of training their clawed cat. This support will help to build a long-term veterinary-client-patient relationship, which in turns supports better healthcare for the cat.



**Figure 7** Rewards such as food, treats, catnip and/or play are recommended to encourage cats or kittens to utilize appropriate scratching surfaces.

## Internet Resources

### **The Cat Community**

<https://catfriendly.com/scratching>

### **Centre for Disease Control**

<https://www.cdc.gov>

### **Environmental Enrichment**

<https://indoorpet.osu.edu/cats>

### **Cat Healthy**

<http://www.cathealthy.ca>

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SCRATCHING RESOURCES

Veterinary Professionals

Guiding Clients on Living with a Clawed Cat (Summary Flyer)

Train your veterinary team how to appropriately counsel and assist your clients to live in harmony with a clawed cat. Topics include why cats scratch inanimate objects, ideal scratching surfaces, troubleshooting inappropriate scratching, and training cats to scratch appropriately in the home.

**GUIDING CLIENTS ON  
Living with a Clawed Cat**

Most clients are not aware that declawing (onychectomy) is a surgical amputation and that scratching is a normal feline behavior. Veterinary practices have a responsibility to counsel their clients, emphasizing the alternatives to declawing and teaching them how to live in harmony with their clawed cat.

**Why Do Cats Have Claws?**  
Share with your clients that cats' claws are anatomically unique and serve several functions. The forelimb claws of the cat are uniquely retractable and allow them to expose or retract their nails as needed.

**Main uses for cats' claws:**

- A cat may expose their claws to hunt and use them to grasp and capture their prey.
- During times of conflict with other cats or other animals, the cat may need to use its claws to defend itself.
- Mark territory both visually (scratching inanimate objects) and chemically (via pheromones).

**Why Do Cats Scratch Inanimate Objects?**  
Emphasize that scratching is a natural, normal, and necessary behavior for cats. They do not scratch with the intention of upsetting their caregiver or damaging furniture. It is a form of communication and often occurs during times of stress and anxiety.

Cats scratch for three main reasons:



- To renew the nail by dislodging the old nail growth and exposing a new, sharper nail underneath.
- To mark their territory visually and with scent (pheromones) to other cats and animals.
- To stretch out their limbs.

Increased scratching and marking may occur in times of stress and anxiety, including when environmental resources are threatened or restricted. It is critical to identify the cause of the stress or anxiety so you can address the issue and reduce the unwanted scratching behavior. A veterinary behaviorist may be needed to help resolve the problem.

**Best Practices for Living with a Clawed Cat**  
Share these preventive strategies with your clients.

Tips for living with a cat with nails:

- Trim cat's nails regularly (provide a demonstration for clients). Temporary synthetic nail caps may be an option for some cats.
- Provide appropriate resources for each cat:
  - Litter boxes
  - Sleeping and resting areas
  - Food bowls
  - Water bowls
  - Scratching surfaces
  - Toys for play
- Provide appropriate environmental enrichment in the home to include interactive play, perches and scratch posts that allow vertical accessibility, and human attention if desired.
- Address any inter-cat related issues that may be causing fear or anxiety. Inter-cat conflict is common and a cause of undesirable scratching. However, as signs are subtle, owners may not recognize the conflict until behavior problems occur. To aid in conflict prevention, ensure all resources are ample and located in multiple locations throughout the house to prevent competition for these resources in multiple cat households.
- Teach everyone in the household that cats should be treated with respect. No one should be allowed to play rough with a cat or handle them in a manner that causes fear, stress, or pain.
- Do not use your fingers or toes, or the wiggling of hands or feet as a toy for play. This form of play can lead to biting or scratching. Instead, play can be stimulated with the use of interactive toys that mimic prey, such as a toy mouse that is pulled across a floor or leathers on a wand that is waved through the air.

(over)

See next 2 pages for full size print version.

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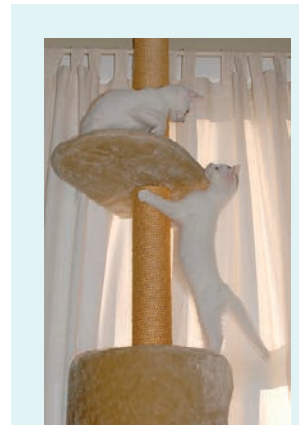
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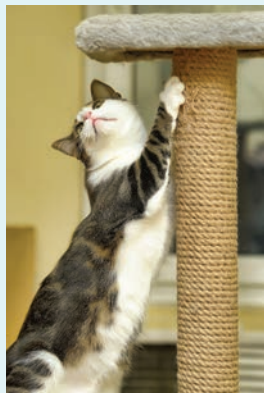
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# GUIDING CLIENTS ON Living with a Clawed Cat continued

## What Makes an Ideal Scratching Surface?



It is best to advise your clients to offer their cat an assortment of options, in a wide variety of locations because the ideal scratching surface is different for each cat.

Here are some important features you should counsel your clients to keep in mind:

- **Size and Shape** - Most cats like to scratch vertically. They will need a sturdy post that is taller than their body length to fully stretch and give a good scratch.

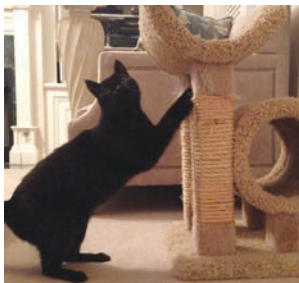
If the cat is scratching carpet, recommend a horizontal scratcher.

- **Texture** - The texture of the scratching post is also important. Many cats prefer sisal rope; others prefer corrugated cardboard, carpet, or wood on the scratching surface.
- It is important to experiment with a variety of textures and types of scratchers to determine which is preferred by each cat.

## Train Cats to Scratch Appropriately

Share these important tips with your clients:

- **Location is critical.**
  - Cats often stretch or scratch when they wake up, so recommend placing a scratcher near the cat's sleeping area.
  - Place a scratching post or pad near where the cat is currently scratching that is undesirable (e.g. in front of a couch leg, or door to the outside) as the changes in scent profile can result in cats re-marking that area.
  - If the cat scratches somewhere other than the scratching post or pad, provide instructions to pick them up, take them to the scratcher, and then provide a reward.
- **Provide rewards and positive reinforcement.**
  - Remind your clients that cats learn best through positive reinforcement.



- As they are redirecting their cat to use the new scratching post or pad, emphasize giving the reward immediately (within 3 seconds) to reinforce the positive behavior.
- It is important to remember they will need to find a reward their cat likes (i.e. treats, catnip, interactive play, and petting, or grooming).

## Troubleshooting Inappropriate Scratching

Here are some common issues that clients may experience and advice you can share:

- **Cat is scratching an undesirable surface.**
  - If the surface is near a window or door where the cat can see and/or smell another cat (or other smells), discourage or remove the unwanted cats from the yard, block window views, and use feline facial pheromones.
- **Frequency of scratching is increasing.**
  - Try to identify and address what may be causing the cat stress, anxiety, or frustration.
  - If the cat is stressed or anxious due to changes in the household (people, furniture, smells, etc.), and other options have not helped, discuss appropriate treatment to resolve distress or anxiety.
  - Conduct a physical examination to identify pain, and treat if appropriate.
  - Discuss and resolve inter-cat issues immediately. Ensure that each cat has access to a complete set of resources, which are separated so that cats have free access without being challenged or blocked by other cats or perceived threats.
  - Review their schedules and recommend consistent timing for feeding, care, petting (if favorable to the cat), and play.
  - Explain the importance of cleaning the litter boxes regularly and ensure they are placed in multiple locations where one cat cannot block the path of the other (e.g. not in a hallway or near steps).

*For more detailed information, access these resources:*

[Catfriendly.com/scratching](http://Catfriendly.com/scratching) (Client Resource)

[Catvets.com/brochures](http://Catvets.com/brochures) (Download Alternatives to Declawing Brochure)

[Catvets.com/scratching](http://Catvets.com/scratching) (Scratching Education)

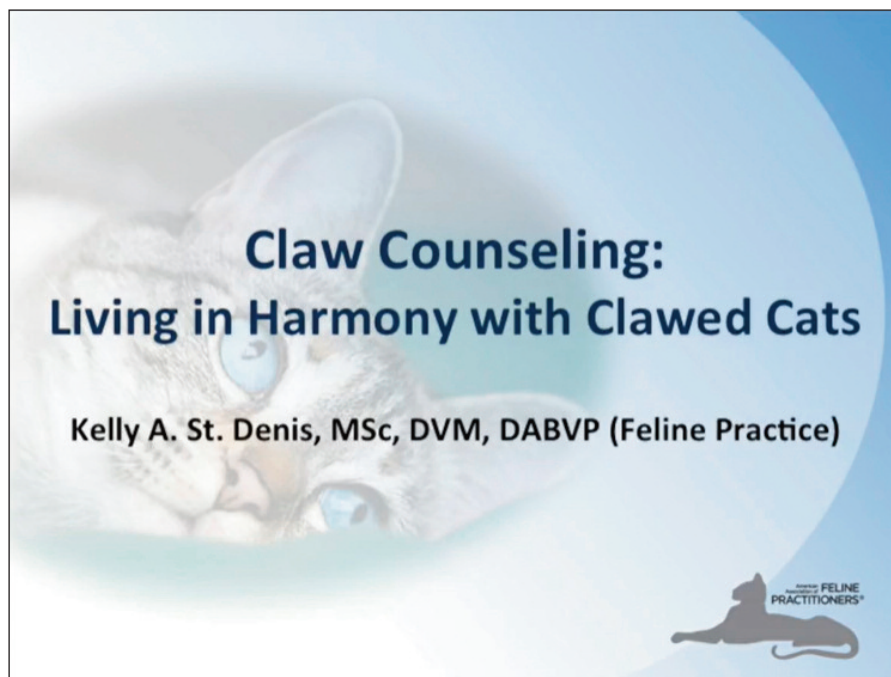


## SCRATCHING RESOURCES

**Veterinary Professionals****Claw Counseling: Living in Harmony with Clawed Cats (Webinar)**

This webinar will help you learn how to counsel your clients so they can live in harmony with their clawed cat. This presentation reviews the natural scratching behavior of domestic cats with guidance on how to target this behavior to desirable surfaces. It will describe the goals behind Claw Counseling, providing the necessary information for veterinary practices to implement this program immediately.

VIEW WEBINAR - <https://catvets.com/clawcounseling>



SCRATCHING RESOURCES

Client Education

It's Natural for Cats to Scratch (Flyer)

This is a flyer you can print or hang in your clinic to educate clients about how scratching is a natural behavior for cats. This resource also provides some tips on best practices for their home.



See next page for full size print version.

# It's NATURAL for Cats to Scratch!

## Cats need to scratch and mark with their claws to:

- Stretch their body.
- Remove the worn layer of their nail.
- Maintain necessary claw motion used in hunting and climbing.
- Leave visible markers to establish their territory, especially if there is concern with other cats in the household or outdoors.

## Best practices:

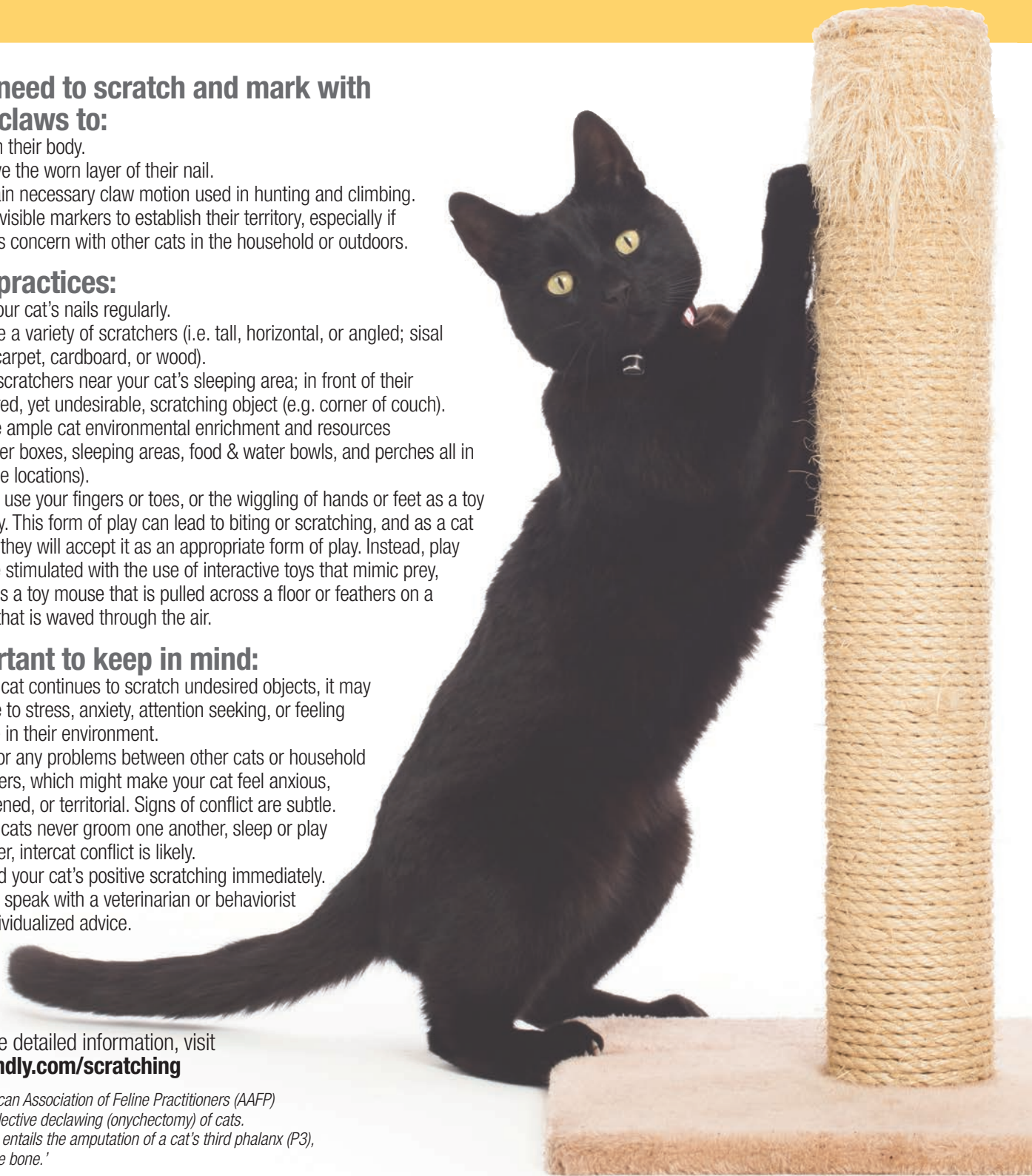
- Trim your cat's nails regularly.
- Provide a variety of scratchers (i.e. tall, horizontal, or angled; sisal rope, carpet, cardboard, or wood).
- Place scratchers near your cat's sleeping area; in front of their preferred, yet undesirable, scratching object (e.g. corner of couch).
- Ensure ample cat environmental enrichment and resources (i.e. litter boxes, sleeping areas, food & water bowls, and perches all in multiple locations).
- Do not use your fingers or toes, or the wiggling of hands or feet as a toy for play. This form of play can lead to biting or scratching, and as a cat grows they will accept it as an appropriate form of play. Instead, play can be stimulated with the use of interactive toys that mimic prey, such as a toy mouse that is pulled across a floor or feathers on a wand that is waved through the air.

## Important to keep in mind:

- If your cat continues to scratch undesired objects, it may be due to stress, anxiety, attention seeking, or feeling unsafe in their environment.
- Look for any problems between other cats or household members, which might make your cat feel anxious, threatened, or territorial. Signs of conflict are subtle. If your cats never groom one another, sleep or play together, intercat conflict is likely.
- Reward your cat's positive scratching immediately.
- Please speak with a veterinarian or behaviorist for individualized advice.

For more detailed information, visit [catfriendly.com/scratching](http://catfriendly.com/scratching)

*The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) opposes elective declawing (onychectomy) of cats. Declawing entails the amputation of a cat's third phalanx (P3), or third 'toe bone.'*



SCRATCHING RESOURCES

Client Education

Living with a Clawed Cat - Information for Cat Caregivers (Flyer)

Supply this flyer to appropriately counsel and assist your clients to live in harmony with a clawed cat. Topics include why cats scratch inanimate objects, ideal scratching surfaces, troubleshooting inappropriate scratching, and training cats to scratch appropriately in the home.

**LIVING WITH A CLAWED CAT**  
**Information for Cat Caregivers**

Scratching is a natural behavior for cats. There are ways you can live alongside your cat in harmony by understanding these natural behaviors and practice good techniques that will enrich your home. Let's learn more about

**Why Do Cats Have Claws?**  
Your cats' claws are unique and serve several functions.

Main uses for cats' claws:

- A cat may expose their claws to hunt and use them to grasp and capture their prey.
- Mark territory both visually (scratching inanimate objects) and chemically (via pheromones).
- To defend itself during conflict with other cats or animals.

**Why Do Cats Scratch Inanimate Objects?**  
Scratching is a natural, normal, and necessary behavior for your cat. Your cat does not scratch to upset you or intentionally damage your furniture. Scratching is a form of communication that your cat expresses during times of stress and anxiety.

Cats scratch for three main reasons:

- To renew the nail by dislodging the old nail growth and exposing a new, sharper nail underneath.
- To mark their territory visually and with scent (pheromones) to other cats and animals.
- To stretch out their limbs.

Your cat may experience increased scratching and marking in times of stress and anxiety, including when environmental resources are threatened or restricted. Discuss your cat's daily routine with your veterinarian so they can address the issue and offer advice to resolve the problem.



**Best Practices for Living with a Clawed Cat**  
Here are some preventative strategies for living with your clawed cat.

Tips for living with a cat with nails:

- Trim cat's nails regularly (Request training from your veterinarian).
- Provide appropriate resources for your cat:
  - Litter boxes
  - Sleeping and resting areas
  - Food bowls
  - Water bowls
  - Scratching surfaces
  - Toys for play
- Provide appropriate environmental enrichment in your home to include interactive play, perches and scratch posts, and human attention if desired.
- Address any inter-cat related issues that may be causing fear or anxiety. Inter-cat conflict is common and a cause of undesirable scratching. The signs are subtle so consult with your veterinarian to help recognize these behavioral problems. Ensure all resources are ample and located in multiple locations throughout your house to prevent competition for these resources if there are multiple cats at home.
- Teach everyone your household that cats should be treated with respect. No one should be allowed to play rough with a cat or handle them in a manner that causes fear, stress, or pain.
- Do not use your fingers or toes, or the wiggling of hands or feet as a toy for play. This form of play can lead to biting or scratching. Instead, play can be stimulated with the use of interactive toys that mimic prey, such as a toy mouse that is pulled across a floor or leathers on a wand that is waved through the air.



(over)

See next 2 pages for full size print version.

# LIVING WITH A CLAWED CAT

## Information for Cat Caregivers



Scratching is a natural behavior for cats. There are ways you can live alongside your cat in harmony by understanding these natural behaviors and practice good techniques that will enrich your home.

### Why Do Cats Have Claws?

Your cats' claws are unique and serve several functions. The forelimb claws of cats are uniquely retractable and allow them to expose or retract their nails as needed.

Main uses for cats' claws:

- A cat may expose their claws to hunt and use them to grasp and capture their prey.
- Mark territory both visually (scratching inanimate objects) and chemically (via pheromones).
- To defend itself during conflict with other cats or animals.

### Why Do Cats Scratch Inanimate Objects?

Scratching is a natural, normal, and necessary behavior for your cat. Your cat does not scratch to upset you or intentionally damage your furniture. Scratching is a form of communication that your cat expresses during times of stress and anxiety.

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### Best Practices for Living with a Clawed Cat

Here are some preventive strategies for living with your clawed cat.

Tips for living with a cat with nails:

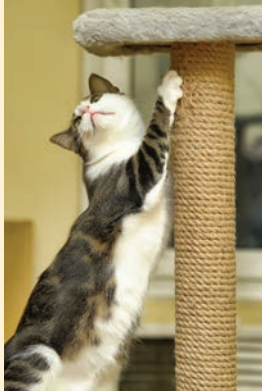
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- Do not use your fingers or toes, or the wiggling of hands or feet as a toy for play. This form of play can lead to biting or scratching. Instead, play can be stimulated with the use of interactive toys that mimic prey, such as a toy mouse that is pulled across a floor or feathers on a wand that is waved through the air.





# Living with a Clawed Cat continued

## What Makes an Ideal Scratching Surface?



Each cat prefers different scratching surfaces. To determine which your cat prefers, offer an assortment of scratching options, in a wide variety of locations around your home.

Here are some important scratching post features to keep in mind:

- Size and Shape - Most cats like to scratch vertically. They will need a sturdy post that is taller than their body length to fully

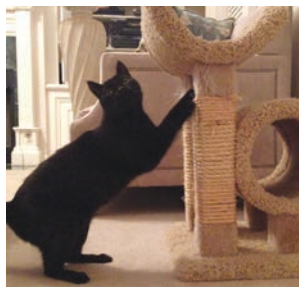
stretch and give a good scratch.

If the cat is scratching carpet, a horizontal scratcher may be a good alternative.

- Texture - The texture of the scratching post is also important. Many cats prefer sisal rope; others prefer corrugated cardboard, carpet, or wood on the scratching surface.
- It is important to experiment with a variety of textures and types of scratchers to determine which is preferred by each cat.

## Train Cats to Scratch Appropriately

- Yes, you can train your cat to scratch certain, approved items and train them not to scratch others.
  - Cats often stretch or scratch when they wake up, so place a scratcher near the cat's sleeping area.
  - Place a scratching post or pad near where the cat is currently scratching that is undesirable (e.g. in front of a couch leg, or door to the outside) as the changes in scent profile can result in cats re-marking that area.
  - If the cat scratches somewhere other than the scratching post or pad, pick them up, take them to the scratcher, and then provide a reward.
- Provide rewards and positive reinforcement.
  - Cats learn best through positive reinforcement.



- Immediately after you redirect your cat to use the new scratching post or pad (within 3 seconds), reward them to reinforce positive behavior.
- Try rewarding your cat with items they already like (i.e. treats, catnip, interactive play, and petting or grooming).

## Troubleshooting Inappropriate Scratching

Here is some general advice for common issues you may be experiencing with your cat:

- My cat is scratching an undesirable surface.
  - If the surface is near a window or door where your cat can see and/or smell another cat (or other smells), discourage or remove the unwanted cats from the yard, block window views, and use feline facial pheromones.
- My cat is scratching more.
  - Try to identify and address what may be causing your cat stress, anxiety, or frustration.
  - If your cat is stressed or anxious due to changes in the household (people, furniture, smells, etc.), and other options have not helped, discuss appropriate treatment to resolve distress or anxiety with your veterinarian.
  - Discuss any inter-cat issues immediately with your veterinarian.
  - Ensure that your cat has access to a complete set of resources, without being hidden or blocked from use.
  - Take note of your cats' daily routine and review it with your veterinarian.
  - Clean litter boxes regularly and ensure they are placed in multiple locations where one cat cannot block the path of the other (e.g. not in a hallway or near steps).

*For more detailed information, access these resources:*  
[Catfriendly.com/scratching](https://catfriendly.com/scratching)



## SCRATCHING RESOURCES

## Client Education

**It's Natural for Cats to Scratch (Social Media Image)**

Use this image and text on your veterinary practice's social media pages to provide education on why cats need to scratch.



## It's **NATURAL** for Cats to Scratch!

*Cats need to scratch and mark with their claws to:*

- Stretch their body
- Remove the worn layer of their nail
- Maintain necessary claw motion used in hunting and climbing
- Leave visible markers to establish their territory, especially if there is concern with other cats in the household or outdoors

*Learn more: [www.catfriendly.com/scratching](http://www.catfriendly.com/scratching)*

**SCRATCHING RESOURCES**

**Client Education**

**Links to AAFP's Client Website - Catfriendly.com**

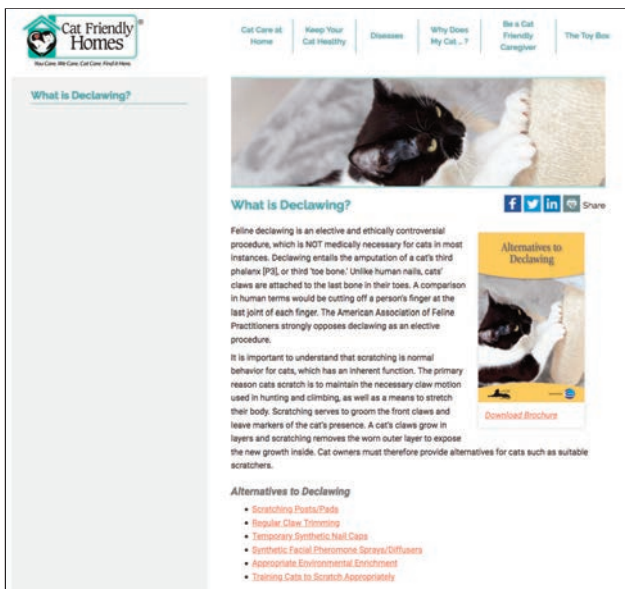
- Living with a Clawed Cat - [www.catfriendly.com/scratching](http://www.catfriendly.com/scratching)



This page covers:

- Why do cats have claws?
- Why do cats scratch inanimate objects?
- Best practices for living with a clawed cat
- What makes an ideal scratching surface?
- Inappropriate scratching tips
- Training your cat to scratch on approved items

- What is Declawing? - [www.catfriendly.com/declawing](http://www.catfriendly.com/declawing)



This page also contains links to information about:

- Scratching Posts/Pads
- Regular Claw Trimming
- Appropriate Environmental Enrichment

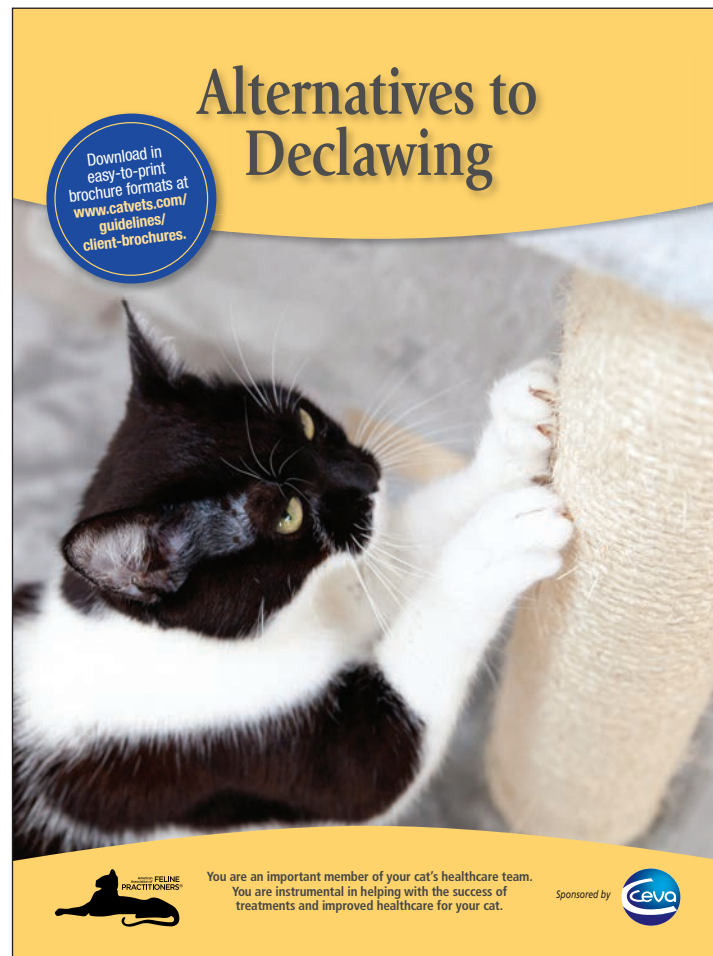
You can share links to these educational pages with your clients via your social media channels, website, and newsletter.



## SCRATCHING RESOURCES

**Client Education****Alternatives to Declawing Client Brochure**

Share this brochure with your clients to educate them on scratching resources and nail care as appropriate alternatives. You can access an electronic and print ready version of this brochure in the online Toolkit at [www.catvets.com/claw-friendly-toolkit](http://www.catvets.com/claw-friendly-toolkit) (on the Scratching Resources or Client Resources tabs). Additionally, this brochure is available in Spanish and Portuguese online.



See next 2 pages for a condensed version.

Check out our additional client education resources!  
<https://catvets.com/claw-friendly-toolkit/client-resources>

# Alternatives to Declawing

Download in  
easy-to-print  
brochure formats at  
[www.catvets.com/  
guidelines/  
client-brochures](http://www.catvets.com/guidelines/client-brochures).



You are an important member of your cat's healthcare team.  
You are instrumental in helping with the success of  
treatments and improved healthcare for your cat.

Sponsored by



# Alternatives to Declawing

## WHAT IS DECLAWING?

Feline declawing is an elective and ethically controversial procedure, which is NOT medically necessary for cats in most instances. Declawing entails the amputation of a cat's third phalanx [P3], or third 'toe bone.' Unlike human nails, cats' claws are attached to the last bone in their toes. A comparison in human terms would be cutting off a person's finger at the last joint of each finger.

It is important to understand that scratching is normal behavior for cats, which has an inherent function. The primary reason cats scratch is to maintain the necessary claw motion used in hunting and climbing, as well as a means to stretch their body. Scratching serves to groom the front claws and leave markers of the cat's presence. A cat's claws grow in layers and scratching removes the worn outer layer to expose the new growth inside. Cat owners must therefore provide alternatives for cats such as suitable scratchers.

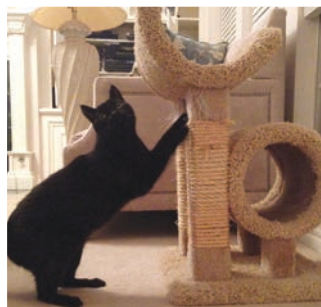
## ALTERNATIVES TO DECLAWING

### Scratching posts/pads

Provide your cat with suitable 'scratchers' where they can exhibit normal scratching behavior. Scratchers come in multiple styles and textures. It is important to experiment with a variety of textures and types of scratchers to determine which your cat prefers. Some examples include scratching posts or pads with sisal rope or rough fabric, cardboard boxes, and lumber or logs. Scratchers can be vertical or horizontal and there are even varieties that blend into your home decor.



The placement of scratchers is very important. Cats often stretch or scratch when they wake up so consider placing one near where your cat sleeps. It may also be effective to place a scratcher near or in front of a cat's preferred, yet undesirable, scratching object (e.g. corner of the couch). Kittens and cats can be trained to use scratchers by rewarding use of the scratcher with the cat's favorite treat. If the cat scratches elsewhere, they should be gently picked up, taken to the scratcher, and then rewarded. Cats should always be positively reinforced and never punished.



## Regular claw trimming

Regularly trimming your cat's claws can prevent injury and damage to household items. Proper feline nail trimmers should be used to prevent splintering of the claws. The frequency of claw trimming will depend on your cat's lifestyle. Indoor cats, kittens, and older cats will need more regular nail trims, whereas outdoor cats may naturally wear down their nails requiring less frequent trimming. If possible, start trimming as kittens so they become comfortable with the process early on. If your cat does not like claw trimmings start slow, offer breaks, and make it a familiar routine. Ask your veterinarian for advice or a demonstration on trimming your cat's claws. Always trim claws in a calm environment and provide positive reinforcement. Proper training to scratch on appropriate surfaces, combined with nail care, can prevent damage in the home.



## Temporary synthetic nail caps

These caps are glued over your cat's nails to help prevent human injury and damage to household items. The nail caps usually need to be re-applied every 4-6 weeks; therefore they may be a less desirable alternative to regular nail trimming, suitable scratchers, and environmental enrichment.

## Synthetic facial pheromone sprays/diffusers

Continued scratching by cats may be related to stress, anxiety, attention seeking, or a perceived lack of security in their environment. Anxiety can also be intensified by punishment, thus driving the cat to increase scratching behaviors in the same or other undesirable locations in the home. Consider using synthetic facial pheromone sprays and/or diffusers to help relieve anxiety or stress. Apply a synthetic pheromone spray such as Feliway® on the objects or areas in your home where your cat has exhibited undesired scratching. Do so after cleaning with soap and water to remove the communication marking scents left by your cat's paws. Applying daily comforting pheromones can prevent your cat's need to mark these areas again. Feliway® should not be sprayed on the desired scratcher. If undesirable scratching occurs in several rooms, indicating a more generalized anxiety or stress, it is recommended to also plug-in a synthetic pheromone diffuser such as Feliway® to comfort your cat in their home environment.

## Appropriate environmental enrichment

Providing your cat with an environment that is enriching is vital to teaching your cat to scratch on appropriate objects. Destructive scratching can occur in cats because their needs have not been fully met. Cats need the proper resources to perform their natural behaviors and have control over their social interactions. You can enhance your cat's health and well-being by ensuring all their needs are met in the home. The AAFP has a wealth of information for cat owners on environmental enrichment. Visit: [www.catvets.com/environmental-needs](http://www.catvets.com/environmental-needs).

For more information on declawing, declawing alternatives, and claw trimming, visit:  
[www.catvets.com/declawalternatives](http://www.catvets.com/declawalternatives)

## FAQs



This page includes responses to many questions that you or your clients may have, as well as sample phone counseling scripts and additional responses to clients.

### Frequently Asked Questions - Clients

#### **Why won't you declaw? I know you'll do a better job with my cat than if I go somewhere else! Please!**

Yes, we are fortunate to have excellent veterinarians who are skilled in surgery and pain management. However, even with the best surgeon, (Meowington) can still experience long-term pain and increased behavior problems resulting from declawing. These are the reasons we no longer perform declaws – we are concerned for (Meowington's) well-being.

#### **Why won't you declaw? I'm going to take my cat to another practice then!**

I understand it can be frustrating to hear we won't perform a declaw for you. You have been a client for a long time (or are a new client), and we would like to continue providing (Meowington) with the very best veterinary care. Can I describe to you what a declawing procedure entails and how it can affect and even harm your cat? New research shows that even when done right and with excellent pain management, declawing can cause lifelong pain and increase behavior problems. Additionally, scratching is a critical and normal behavior for cats. It allows them to stretch and release stress, but they can't scratch without claws. For more information, please refer to the Phone Scripts.

#### **You used to offer it. Why was it okay then but not now? Should I be concerned that my cat you declawed three years ago may be in pain? How can I tell?**

Yes, we used to perform declaws. The veterinary profession is continuing to advance and learn more about doing

a better job for our patients. There have been recent scientific studies on the effects of declawing, and they show that declaws can cause cats chronic pain, as well as increase behavior issues. Based on this new information, we have made the decision to stop performing declawing because we care about your cat's long-term health and welfare.

For cats that have been previously declawed, we will continue to monitor for any pain and discuss any behavior issues during your cat's routine check-ups. Additionally, we encourage you to monitor (Meowington) at home. If you notice any small behavior changes such as reduced jumping, urinating outside of the litter box, excessive grooming, aggression or biting, or hiding, please call us right away. If we identify (Meowington) might be in pain, we will recommend treatment to help (him/her) stay comfortable.

We should also discuss enhancing (Meowington's) environmental enrichment. Since scratching is a normal behavior for cats, we need to make sure to provide the opportunity for (Meowington) to express other normal feline behaviors. I have an excellent brochure to share with you called "Your Cat's Environmental Needs."

Please refer to the AAFP's Environmental Needs Client brochure and [www.catfriendly.com/environmental-needs](http://www.catfriendly.com/environmental-needs).



## FAQs

Frequently Asked Questions - Clients *continued***Why are you trying to make me feel guilty and feel like a bad pet owner?**

I know that you love (Meowington) and I believe in your ability to make the right decision for your cat. This can be a difficult and sensitive topic, and as a veterinarian, I'm obligated to explain this procedure and what effects it could have on (Meowington). Because you are a vital part of your cat's health team, we want you to be as informed as possible on any and all procedures you are considering for your cat. I felt you deserved to know why our practice has decided to stop declawing cats.

## Frequently Asked Questions - Veterinary Professionals

**What if an owner decides to bring the cat down the street to another practice? I know at least that I can provide a more cat-friendly experience and ensure appropriate pain management.**

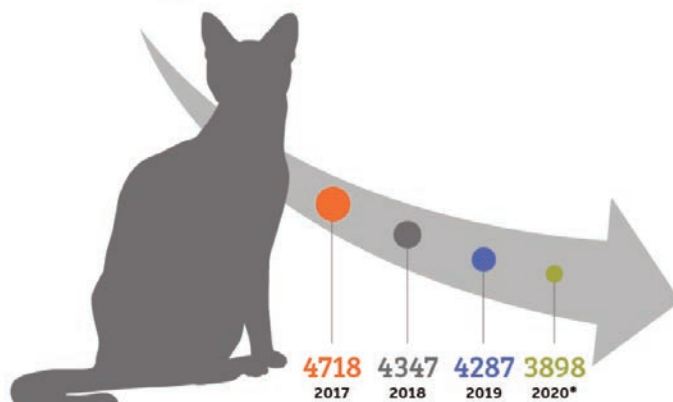
We never want a client going to another practice, and we certainly never want a client going to a practice we think will not provide a good experience or quality feline medicine. However, even when a veterinarian is an excellent surgeon and experienced at declawing, the potential for chronic problems still exist. This is a decision based upon what is best for cats mentally, physically, and emotionally. With new medical knowledge, we recognize that declawing impairs feline welfare by inhibiting their ability to perform normal scratching behavior.

Additionally, despite excellent analgesia, long-term pain resulting from declawing is common, as well as an increased incidence of behavioral problems. As veterinarians, it is our responsibility to protect the welfare of our patients and provide the highest standard care. We have basic ethical precepts that at the forefront include that we should avoid harming our patients.

**Won't more cats get surrendered if I don't declaw?**

This is a common misperception, and there is no evidence that more cats get surrendered if declawing is not an option. Most cat owners do not know what declawing entails and are embarrassed when they find out the specifics about the procedure. Also, many cat owners declaw because that's what they've always done. Education is the first step in explaining to cat owners why

cat's scratch and that it is normal feline behavior. As you can see in this data from the Dumb Friends League, one of the largest animal shelters in Denver, the number of surrendered cats has decreased since Denver banned declawing.

**Annual Number of Owner Surrendered Cats has Decreased Since Implementation of Denver Declaw Ban\*\***

\*Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) may impact this number  
\*\*Source: Dumb Friends League in Denver, CO (FY2020 statistics, July 1, 2019 - June 30, 2020)

**How can I stop declawing? I'm going to lose clients because they want/need their cats to be declawed?**

The first step in this process is education for clients as well as the veterinary team. You can find helpful information for your team on the Practice Plan tab and information to start and/or enhance client education on the Scratching Resources tab. If you have a large demand for declawing, then you might need to be proactive and provide interviews, write blogs, and put together general information so your clients and others in your local area understand what a declaw truly entails. Many other veterinary practices have already chosen to stop performing declawing procedures over the past several years and have not lost clients. They educated their clients on the negative aspects of declawing and counseled them on how to prevent their cats from scratching in undesirable areas. Many practices have actually gained more clients because they stopped declawing. Clients often recognize that you are acting in the best interest of cats. Clients recognize and respect you as a veterinary professional. When you make the decision to stop, they will see that you have given this meaningful thought and respect your decision.





## FAQs

**Why should I stop declawing as I use laser technique that is less painful, right?**

The use of a laser to perform a declaw does not change the surgical approach, which involves amputation of the third phalanx of each digit. In that process, tissue is cut and the procedure is painful. While past studies have suggested that the immediate postoperative recovery period is less painful when laser declaw is performed compared to scalpel declaw, the data clearly show ongoing pain for both surgery methods. At no time does either surgery result in a painless postoperative experience. In addition, these patients were only studied for 12 or fewer days post-operatively. Some of the additional complications that can occur including chronic pain, retrained P3 fragments, and tendon contraction, occur in declawed cats regardless of surgical method, including laser. Long-term behavior changes are documented including house soiling, aggression and biting, and barbering. Declawed cats also show an increased risk of back pain associated with being declawed, regardless of the surgical method used.

**Phone Counseling for Inquiries About Declawing Initial Inquiry**

The practice should decide who will provide educational information to any clients requesting declawing. It is important to discuss responses with your entire team for consistency. Below are some examples of how to handle inquiries.

“Thank you for calling (practice name). This is (your name), how can I help you?”

**Client** – “How much does it cost to have my cat declawed?”

**Practice** – “May I first have your name and the name of your cat?”

**Client** – “Her name is (Meowington), and mine is (Janice).”

**Practice** – “Have we seen (Meowington) before, (Janice)?”

**Client** – “Yes/No”

**Practice** – “We actually don’t perform declawing procedures here at (practice name), but we would really like to help you. I’m sure we can help find a solution that works for both you and (Meowington).

Do you have time today or tomorrow to speak with (Team member name) so they can discuss this with you and/or examine your cat?”

**+ Follow-up Phone Call**

**Practice** – “Hello, I’m (your name) calling from (practice name). May I please speak with (Janice)? Do you have a few minutes to discuss declawing, scratching behavior, and alternatives with me?”

**Client** – “Yes/No”

**Practice** – “Scratching is a natural cat behavior, but did you know that it is also a behavior that is very important for (Meowington)? Cat’s need to scratch to maintain the necessary claw motion used in hunting and climbing, remove the old nail, stretch their body, and as a means of visual and olfactory, or scent, communication. Cats also seem to really enjoy scratching.

I know that you don’t want (Meowington)’s scratching to harm your home and belongings. I have some great resources that I would love to share with you that can help train (Meowington) to scratch on more appropriate surfaces and stop causing damage to your home. For more information, please refer to the Client Resources.

**Practice** – Has anyone ever shown you how to trim (Meowington’s) nails?”

**Client** – “No”

**Practice** – “We would be glad to show you how to trim (his/her) nails, or we can do it for you! Why don’t you bring (him/her) in?”

**Client** – “Why don’t you perform declawing procedures at (your practice)?”

**Practice** – “Since declawing is an elective procedure that is not medically necessary, we don’t perform declaw surgery unless it is medically necessary, such as tumors or infection. Declawing entails the amputation of a cat’s third phalanx [P3], or third ‘toe bone.’ Unlike human nails, cats’ claws are attached to the last bone in their toes. A comparison would be cutting off a person’s finger at the last joint of each finger. Would you be interested in learning more about all of the alternatives there are to declawing?”



## FAQs

**Client** – “If you won’t perform the declawing surgery, then I’ll just take them to someplace that will.”

**Practice** – It sounds like you are frustrated, and I’m sorry that you are feeling that way. It can be very frustrating to have your cat scratching up your house. Declawing sounds like an easy solution, but it is a serious surgery that can have medical complications and/or cause life-long pain. We want to work WITH you to find a successful strategy for both you and (Meowington). We take our medical oath very seriously and must act in your cat’s best interest as well. Would you like to come in for a complimentary scratching consultation to see if there’s another way?

### Additional Responses to Client Inquiries

**My apartment/landlord says I cannot have a cat unless they are declawed.**

This is quite disappointing to hear. Have you checked with City Hall/the municipality? Landlords certainly have the right to protect their property, but they cannot insist on what you do or don’t do to your cat. We’d be happy to provide information that you can share with your landlord, as well as counsel you on redirecting scratching (if appropriate), so you can demonstrate your efforts to both allow your cat to exhibit their natural behaviors and that you value your landlord’s property. For more information, please refer to Client Resources - Living with a Clawed Cat.

**My cats stay inside, so they are safe from outdoor threats!**

You are right that indoor cats cannot be hit by cars or get into fights with other animals unless they get out, but we still have to meet their behavioral needs so they can do the things that make a cat a cat. And sometimes, when cats aren’t able to exhibit their natural behaviors, they feel stressed and may direct that stress towards other actions such as scratching, marking, or house-soiling.

**I have a baby/grandmother/live with an immunocompromised person, and I don’t want them to get scratched!**

That’s understandable! Sometimes people believe that cats spread dangerous things through scratches. It is true that Cat Scratch Disease is spread via scratches, but the organism that causes this disease is found in flea dirt, so treating for and preventing fleas, will eliminate that risk. Trimming nails every 4-6 weeks really helps as well. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) does not recommend declawing to prevent transmission of Cat Scratch Fever. The CDC also does not recommend declawing to protect immunocompromised people. Instead, the CDC and veterinarians recommend regular nail trims, regular flea prevention, and avoiding rough play with cats. We recommend using an interactive toy and never playing with your hands or by wiggling hands or feet. Protecting children and family members from cat scratches is accomplished through gentle and proper handling of the cat, avoiding rough play, and trimming their nails regularly. Children should be taught to treat their cat with respect and to play with the cat using an interactive toy. Young children should have adult supervision when interacting with them. For more information, please refer to Client Resources - Playing with Your Cat and Cats & Kids.



## FAQs

**Additional Responses to Client Inquiries** *continued***How do I explain that I don't declaw to clients that say they are immunocompromised?**

It is understandable that clients may relay that they do not want to be scratched if they or someone in their household is immunocompromised. People often worry that cats spread dangerous diseases through scratches. It is true that Cat Scratch Disease is spread via scratches, but the bacterial organism (*Bartonella henselae*) that causes this disease is found in flea dirt, which can get under the cat's claws if there is a flea infestation. Treating cats with routine flea and parasite prevention regardless of indoor/outdoor status will prevent fleas, thereby eliminating that risk. In addition, the benefits of using routine broad spectrum parasite prevention also means that the immunocompromised individual will not be at risk for exposure to other parasites such as helminths. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) does not recommend declawing to prevent transmission of Cat Scratch Fever. The CDC does not recommend declawing to protect immunocompromised people. Instead, the CDC and veterinarians recommend regular nail trims, regular flea prevention, and avoiding rough play with cats. With data indicating that declawed cats may be more likely to bite and/or house soil, the risks of infectious disease exposure are not at all negated by onychectomy.

We can relay this information to concerned clients and provide these helpful tips:

1. Trim the cat's nails every 4-6 weeks to reduce damage from potential scratches. Practices should consider demonstrating how to trim nails and discuss tactics with clients that may make this a more positive experience for their cat such as distraction techniques, as well as thinking about the appropriate time and location to approach their cat. You may even want to discuss with your team the possibility of offering routine or complimentary nail trims.
2. Avoid rough play with cats. Veterinary professionals can recommend using interactive toys and remind clients to never play with their hands or by wiggling hands or feet. Protecting children and family members from cat scratches is accomplished through gentle and proper handling of the cat and avoiding rough play. You can also share resources with families with children so they can be taught to treat their cat with respect and to play with the cat using an interactive toy. Young children should have adult supervision when interacting with them. (See Client Resources – Playing with Your Cat and Cats & Kids).

3. Ensure the cat receives regular parasite prevention treatments as directed by a veterinarian.
4. Individuals with compromised immune systems may consider adopting adult cats as they tend to be calmer and less rough than kittens who have not yet developed their social skills.

Additional information about zoonotic disease, prevention, and transmission can be found in the 2019 AAFP Zoonoses Guidelines, which also includes a Client Brochure and podcast.



## PRACTICE PLANS

### *Implementation Plans to Discontinue Elective Declawing at your Practice*

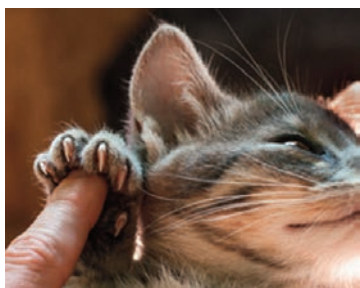
Below are two sample plans to discontinue elective declawing, which provide steps and ideas that you can customize to fit your practice.

#### **Now is the Time to Discontinue Declawing: Immediate Roll Out**

Congratulations! You've made the important decision for your veterinary practice to immediately stop declawing! Here are some steps regarding making the announcement and rolling out this change.

##### **1. Share this good news with your team members.**

- Share with them why you made this decision so they understand why this is important to you, the practice, clients, and patients. (e.g., Currently, we only perform a few declawing procedures a year. So, there isn't a high demand and more importantly, it is an outdated practice that can harm cats and permanently leave them in pain.)



- Listen to any questions, concerns, and praise from your team members. Then provide them the facts and information that support your decision. This Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit can be a great resource to help educate the entire team.
- Train all team members on answering client questions consistently about why your practice is no longer performing declawing procedures. If a client presses the issue, provide your team with scripts and key messages they can use (find samples under the Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit sections "Phone Counseling" and "FAQs").
  - Provide clients with the Client Resources in the toolkit: Alternatives to Declawing Brochure, It's Natural to Scratch Flyer, the AAFP's Position Statement, Living with a Clawed Cat Flyer, and a link to the AAFP's Living with a Clawed Cat website page ([catfriendly.com/scratch](http://catfriendly.com/scratch)) which has information on why cats have claws, why cats scratch inanimate objects, best practices for living with a clawed cat, ideal scratching surfaces, inappropriate scratching tips, and training your cat to scratch on certain approved items.

- You can also provide your team with the literature review and summaries so they are prepared to answer specific questions about behavior and long-term pain.
- Train your team members on how to educate your clients on why cats scratch, ways to re-direct scratching that is problematic for caregivers, benefits of pheromones, how to live happily with a clawed cat, and how declawing is harmful to cats. This Toolkit can be a great resource to provide your team with information to help educate clients.
- Explain to your team members that if a client asks about declawing, the policy is to educate about cat's natural behavior to scratch and what declawing entails. Remind them your practice does not recommend other clinics for a specific declaw procedure.
- Review and consider updating your practice's complaint policy as needed. Consider having a destination and procedure for any client who has a complaint that the practice has stopped declawing (i.e., all complaints should be in writing and sent to [concerns@\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_.com](mailto:concerns@_____.com)).
- Share the AAFP's front office phone counseling script provided in the Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit.

##### **2. Review and update your website to remove any reference to declawing procedures. We recommend doing a keyword search using the words "declaw" and "onychectomy" within your website.**

- Review all forms, policies, and resources in order to remove any content about declawing procedures. Update them with information about offering complimentary nail trims using Cat Friendly Handling and/or providing Claw Counseling to clients.
- Send out a press release and/or an email/newsletter announcement celebrating the news to your current and former clients. Be proud and make it a BIG DEAL!
- Post text on your website and/or social media channels



## PRACTICE PLANS

*Implementation Plans to Discontinue Elective Declawing at your Practice***Gradual Plan: Soft Launch Over a Couple Months**

Congratulations! You've made the ultimate decision to announce that your practice will stop declawing. Here are some steps to take in order to prepare your team members and phase in this change in philosophy.

**Month 1:** Plan a series of team meetings (to present the idea

and plan, review the scientific literature, allow your staff to share concerns and praise in a safe space, create plans to address concerns, create key messaging for team members to use with clients, etc.). Space out the meetings over 1-3 months as needed.

- **Meeting #1:** Discuss this change with your entire team. Explain that this will be a gradual plan in order to implement new procedures, educate staff and clients, and launch the announcement. Determine your goal date to completely and officially stop all declawing procedures.
  - Relay the reasons you decided to stop offering any declawing procedures.
  - Provide your team members with this AAFP Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit and review the scientific literature abstracts, scratching education resources, FAQs, practice experiences, and client resources. Ask staff to read through all of the materials before the next meeting and to prepare/submit their questions and/or concerns so they can be discussed at the next meeting.
- **Meeting #2:** Relay progress, review additional information, and brainstorm solutions.
  - Review the Claw Counseling: Helping Clients Live Alongside Cats with Claws article and answer any questions.
  - Review the “FAQs” section of the Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit and go over sample phone counseling scripts for clients and additional responses to clients.
  - Discuss your team member’s questions and concerns. Encourage team members to identify and develop positive solutions. Consider offering complimentary nail trims using Cat Friendly Handling.

- Consider asking team members to watch AAFP’s two free webinars which include Claw Counseling: Living in Harmony with Clawed Cats and Feline Onychectomy: What We Know and What We Don’t Know.

- **Meeting #3:** Discuss progress of processes and the status of the roll out announcement to clients.
  - Provide training sessions on complimentary nail trims using Cat Friendly Handling so cats and clients have a positive experience.
  - Discuss your process and approach to providing a claw counseling session to any client who asks about declawing.
- **Meeting #4:** Practice!
  - Have the team role-play using the phone script, explaining that declawing is no longer offered at your practice, responding to a client who wants to have their cat declawed, etc.
  - Ask veterinarians and technicians to practice providing a Claw Counseling session.
- If your team members are not on board with the plan or are struggling, schedule additional meetings either as a team or individually.

**Month 2:**

- Review and update your website to remove any reference to declawing procedures. We recommend doing a keyword search using the words “declaw” and “onychectomy” within your website.
- Draft your policy changes and customize the AAFP sample phone counseling scripts and FAQ responses for your staff. Be sure to include that the practice does not refer clients to other clinics for declaw procedure.
- Create your plan for phone and in-person complaints about discontinuing declawing procedures at your practice. Will you follow your current complaint policy? Consider having a destination and procedure for declawing complaints (i.e. all complaints should be in writing and sent to concerns@\_\_\_\_\_.com).
- Review the AAFP’s Client Resources in the Claw Friendly Educational Toolkit. Determine what educational materials you will provide to clients.



## PRACTICE PLANS

*Implementation Plans to Discontinue  
Elective Declawing at your Practice***Gradual Plan: Soft Launch Over a Couple Months**  
*continued*

**Month 3:** Update your website to include AAFP Client Resources like Living with a Clawed Cat Flyer, It's Natural to Scratch Flyer, and link to the AAFP's Living with a Clawed Cat website page ([catfriendly.com/scratch](http://catfriendly.com/scratch)) which has information on why cats have claws, why cats scratch inanimate objects, best practices for living with a clawed cat, ideal scratching surfaces, tips on how to stop inappropriate scratching, training your cat to scratch on certain approved items. If you have a newsletter for clients include these educational materials as well.

- Set a deadline and inform clients.
- Update all forms and resources to remove any content about declawing procedures. Add policies about complimentary nail trims and/or providing Claw Counseling to clients.

**Months 4-6:**

- Begin offering Claw Counseling sessions to any client who requests information about declawing. Utilize this time to educate clients about declawing (why the practice has stopped, what the surgery includes, what it can do long-term, etc.), and how to live with their clawed cat.
- STOP DECLAWING!
- On your goal date, send out a press release and/or an email/newsletter announcement celebrating the news to your current and former clients. Be proud and make it a BIG DEAL!
- Post text on your website and/or social media channels.

**Sample Announcement Text**

As a designated Cat Friendly Practice®, we demonstrate a unique ability to treat and handle feline patients gently and with respect. It is our mission to implement the highest standards of care, and stay ahead with offering the best practices in feline medicine.

As we continue to provide you and your cat with the best possible care, [Practice Name] is proud to announce we will no longer be offering declawing procedures (onychectomy)!

Feline declawing is an elective and ethically controversial procedure that entails the amputation of a cat's third phalanx [P3], or third 'toe bone.' Recent scientific studies have shown that even when done correctly, and with excellent pain management, declawing can cause life-long pain and increased behavior problems in cats.

Declawing is not medically necessary in most instances, and the vast majority of "undesirable" scratching behaviors can be eradicated through regular claw trimming, meeting cat's environmental needs, and training.

It is our responsibility to aid our valued clients in making an informed medical decision in the best interest of their cats. This includes providing the latest scientific information to cat owners and providing them with accessible and easy-to-implement declawing alternatives.

Scratching is a completely normal and natural feline behavior with an inherent function. The primary reason cats scratch is to maintain the necessary claw motion used in hunting and climbing. Cats also scratch as a means of visual and olfactory (scent) communication, to stretch their body, and remove old nail growth.

Ending elective declawing procedures is a crucial decision and commitment for [Practice Name], and we're here to guide you through decisions regarding your cat's health. Please contact us to discuss your questions and concerns at [Practice Contact Email or Phone Number].

You can also access a number of helpful resources, including educational brochures, flyers, scratching post/pad recommendations, and more at [www.catfriendly.com/scratching](http://www.catfriendly.com/scratching).

Thank you for your support - we are proud in our decision of putting the health and welfare of your cat first!



## PRACTICE PLANS

*Implementation Plans to Discontinue  
Elective Declawing at your Practice***Sample Announcement Text****ALTERNATIVE TEXT:**

You may not know what declawing entails. Don't worry, the team at *[Practice Name]* are here to answer all your questions and provide the best care for your cat. Please ask us about our new declawing policy and schedule an appointment with us to find out more about normal scratching behaviors and claw trimmings.

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP), which has designated *[Practice Name]* as a Cat Friendly Practice®, strongly opposes declawing as an elective procedure. In keeping with our cat friendly mission, we are ending all declawing surgeries. Scratching is a normal feline behavior. It allows cats to stretch and release stress, but they can't scratch without claws. Declawing entails the amputation of a cat's third phalanx [P3], or third 'toe bone.' Unlike human nails, cats' claws are attached to the last bone in their toes. A comparison would be cutting off a person's finger at the last joint of each finger.

We have many educational resources about normal scratching behaviors for your cat and you can also find out more information at [www.catfriendly.com/scratching](http://www.catfriendly.com/scratching). *[Practice Name]* feels strongly about our position. We are happy to discuss strategies to help you and your cat find solutions to unwanted scratching. Please contact our office at (practice contact email or phone number) with your questions and concerns.

**Announcement of Upcoming Deadline Sample Text**

As a designated Cat Friendly Practice®, we demonstrate a unique ability to treat and handle feline patients gently and with respect. It is our mission to implement the highest standards of care, and stay ahead with offering the best practices in feline medicine.

As we continue to provide you and your cat with the best possible care, *[Practice Name]* is proud to announce we will be ending all declawing procedures (onychectomy) as of *[X Date]*.

Feline declawing is an elective and ethically controversial procedure that entails the amputation of a cat's third phalanx [P3], or third 'toe bone.' Recent scientific studies have shown that even when done correctly, and with excellent pain management, declawing can cause lifelong pain and increased behavior problems in cats.

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## PRACTICE PLANS

### *Implementation Plans to Discontinue Elective Declawing at your Practice*

#### **Announcement of Upcoming Deadline Sample Text**

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## PRACTICE EXPERIENCES

### *Experiences from Practices that have Stopped Elective Declawing*

Contained herein are real-world experiences that demonstrate how practices made the transition to no longer offer declawing as an elective procedure. They discuss various techniques and tactics that were applied in order to implement new policies and educate staff and clients, as well as share positive impacts. Below several practices provide their stories and feedback.

#### **Banfield Pet Hospital**

On January 1, 2020, more than 1,000 Banfield hospitals and the Mars Veterinary Health family of brands stopped the practice of elective declawing. Every medical procedure supported by Banfield has been put in place with the health and wellness of pets in mind, and, based on this, we do not support the elective declawing. Banfield veterinarians should educate and encourage owners on alternatives to declaw.

There is a great concern for medical complications. Banfield found, based on literature review, that several short- and long-term complications were reported from declawing across veterinary practices, with estimates of postoperative complication ratings ranging from 24-80%.

As we began to enact this change, communication was key when taking the first steps to end declawing at so many practices and focusing effort on the 'why' behind our decision. Our practice's field leadership communicated the change to medical leaders and made sure they understood why the change was being made. Those leaders then shared the change with hospital associates and were encouraged to talk to one another to fully understand the new policy and strengthen the positioning behind it. Ongoing review of literature and data was fundamental when making the decision to end declawing, and we used a robust plan to launch this to our hospitals nationwide.

Even with COVID-19 disruptions in 2020, since Banfield has stopped declawing, we have seen a 3.6% increase in cat visits in 2020 compared to total cat visits in 2019 (data for 2020 was through 11/23/20).

#### **Banfield Hospital in Minnesota**

##### ***Did you have any unhappy clients and if so, what did you relay to them?***

As with any conversation with a client – difficult or positive – it's important to come from a place of compassion and understanding. In situations where a client might be frustrated after learning we won't be performing an elective declaw on their cat, I find a majority of the time their response is coming from a lack of general

understanding of the procedure. Particularly with new cat owners or those who haven't owned a cat for many years, they can also have preconceived notions or fears about what having a clawed cat is actually like. When Banfield implemented our declaw policy practice-wide, it made these tough conversations easier and empowered us to stand behind the 'why' of our decision.

In my experience, there is always a little bit of a surprised reaction from pet owners when I tell them our declaw policy is a company-wide position across all of our 1,000 hospitals nationwide. That surprise almost always turns to curiosity, and the first question they ask is, "why?" This opens the doors for our team to educate the client on potential wellbeing consequences for their cat and the pain involved in the procedure. I find other key components of working through frustrations with a client are to review alternative options in-depth with them, talk about the importance of nail trimmings, perform the first nail-trimming in the hospital, and review at-home trimmings. It can also be helpful to provide written material for them to review on their own.

After spending time with the client to help them understand all the different elements of the procedure and other ways they can manage the situation at home, I find that 9 times out of 10 we end the visit with the client feeling good about the decision – and they almost never bring the declaw topic up again at future visits.

##### ***Were there any positive outcomes?***

In addition to the benefits mentioned above, we find that taking the time to really educate cat owners on the elective declaw procedure and potential implications for their cat can help strengthen the client-veterinarian bond and build more trust in the long run. They understand that our decision is rooted in wanting the best thing for them and their cat.

Deciding not to perform elective declaws can also be a differentiator for practices looking to attract new talent who might be more drawn to a hospital if their views are aligned with the practice's policies. Having a formal position can help staff feel empowered to practice veterinary medicine in a way that aligns with their standard of care.



## PRACTICE EXPERIENCES

### *Experiences from Practices that have Stopped Elective Declawing*

#### **Banfield Hospital in Minnesota continued**

##### ***Is there anything else you would share with other veterinary professionals?***

Implementing a new policy can sometimes feel daunting as you aren't sure how clients might react and what implications it could potentially have for your hospital team. Implementing the Mars Veterinary Health declaw policy at our hospital has helped position our veterinary team as a trusted source that puts the health of the pet first – and strengthen the relationship we have with our clients, who now have a better understanding of the 'why' behind our decision. We as veterinary professionals face difficult situations every day, but as long as we are approaching challenges with compassion and understanding, we can feel good knowing we are doing what's right for our patients.

#### **Feline-Only Practice in Ontario, Canada**

In 2015, our two feline-only clinics stopped declawing. We regret not having done it sooner. Even in the last five years, I have seen a paradigm shift in cat families – they don't agree with declawing, and many showed relief that we no longer did it or could support it under any circumstances. People would say, "well, I really didn't want to do it anyway," when the topic arose, so they were relieved and accepting.

##### ***Have your cat visits decreased or increased since you stopped declawing?***

Our practices are growing, and stopping declawing had absolutely no negative financial impact—actually, the opposite as we acquired new clients as we were a non-declaw clinic. We have a strong retention rate and a large number of new clients – we are near to the point where we have grown beyond our capacity. We always include complimentary nail trims with our examinations (unless it is a fearful cat that didn't take pre-visit medication) as a way to "celebrate having nails on all four paws" – our clients love this, and it has increased their respect and trust.

##### ***What processes did you implement to ultimately stop declawing?***

We prepared by educating clients and the team. We did fewer and fewer declaws because of that, and then when we stopped, it was a non-issue. If I had to do it over again, I would have stopped years before we did. We always

used the excuse – we do it right, and we have great pain protocols – hindsight is 20/20. Preparations and education for the team can be done with a CE lunch and learn. Once the team is on board and can chat about the decision with clients, it is a no brainer. Our only mistake is that we should have done it long before we did. Once the team is educated and have their "scripts" for the client, it can be stopped overnight with only a positive impact.

##### ***Were there any positive outcomes?***

Young veterinarians don't want to declaw. We are in a time where veterinarians are hard to come by, and it is an incentive that we don't declaw for young veterinarians to work at our practice. It is one of the questions they ask during interviews – "do you declaw here?" Staff are proud, and it's easy to get new team members to join us. We have a fully booked appointment schedule, and it continues to be that way. We also sell a lot of scratching resources, nail trimmers, and have cats coming in and paying for nail trims. My practices are still at a healthy growth rate, and I have some excellent young practitioners who would not stay with us if we declawed.

##### ***Is there anything else you would share with other veterinary professionals?***

Once you stop declawing, you are shocked that you ever did it. One of the 'Five Freedoms' for Humane Treatment of Animals is for them to have the ability to express their normal behavior. Scratching is normal behavior for a cat, and therefore by definition – declawing is cruel. With my work with Cat Healthy in Canada, we do a lot of data collection about cat owners. Times have changed, and young people and the majority of the cat-owning public think declawing is cruel, as do shelters and humane organizations. We need to move with the times regarding medicine, cat handling, and what our clients feel is important, and what we know is right for the feline species in order to have successful practices. We had to pivot on a dime to safely practice with this pandemic, so we have shown as a profession that we can change.

Giving up declawing is an easy decision that can be made immediately. You and your practice will never look back, except with regret that you ever did it in the first place. Many provinces across Canada have banned declawing, and I am embarrassed that Ontario still allows it. It is our responsibility as veterinarians to lead the way to do what is right for the feline species.



## PRACTICE EXPERIENCES

### *Experiences from Practices that have Stopped Elective Declawing*

#### **Small Animal Practice in Denver, CO**

In 2017, Denver City Council passed a bill on declawing effective immediately, but we had rarely performed the procedure since we opened our practice in 2011. We see about 5200 feline patients a year and have always discouraged declawing. When the issue was in front of the Denver City Council, we were promoting our support of the ban and definitely heard support from clients and staff.

#### ***How did you prepare?***

At our practice, we focused on education and providing alternatives such as training regarding nail trims, appropriate toys, and enrichment to our clients, which increased client loyalty. The surgery was a last resort, and when we discontinued, it wasn't missed.

#### ***Were there any positive outcomes?***

Our staff appreciated that we fully discontinued declawing. It was never a procedure that provided a marked financial impact. The city aligned with our values so we could discontinue in a public way, not just privately.

#### **Feline-Only Practice in Columbus, OH**

#### ***When did your practice stop declawing?***

We have been transitioning but officially ended in January 2020. We started by banning all four paw declaws and then moved to requiring consultation visits that would provide all education options to owners that we had to offer. Then we restricted it to only families who claimed they had a high-risk family member (which, with time, we realized this is a myth) and those who threatened to go elsewhere (which terrified us). Eventually, we officially ended declawing all together.

#### ***What processes did you implement to end elective declawing?***

When I was a student in veterinary school, declawing of cats was briefly discussed. I had a handful of lectures on feline-specific medicine, none of which were in-depth feline behavior, and certainly none regarding alternatives to declawing.

When I left general practice for my current feline-only practice (established 25 years at that time and were performing declaws), I began the process of ABVP board certification and became a member of the AAFP. I started getting more exposure to feline behavior and discovered more and more published data revealing the long-term complications these declawed cats were experiencing. Honestly, the behavior lectures given at the 2016 AAFP Conference really gave me the tools I needed to begin the process of ceasing declawing at our practice.

In 2018, we established a new kitten-visit protocol for the practice to make sure all kittens/owners were receiving the same training regardless of whether this was their first cat or tenth cat. We wanted to make sure everyone was hearing the same things from our staff regarding behavior, scratching, training, and environmental enrichment. Eventually, we developed a more structured behavior consultation program for cats that destructively scratch at home, and we then saw fewer and fewer declaws getting booked. We then moved towards more organized claw "consultation" appointments where we would meet with a client several times before considering the declaw procedure as we had a good success rate at getting owners to accept alternatives. These tactics helped get us to the point where we stopped declawing at the practice.

#### ***Did you have any unhappy clients and if so what did you relay to them?***

The hardest clients to convince that declawing is unethical and wrong were those that have "always had declawed cats" who were "fine," - especially those who had the procedure performed here at our practice over the last few decades. We found that sharing published literature seemed to be the most impactful for these clients, as well as relaying that even though their cat was one of the "lucky ones," the majority of other cats are sadly not as fortunate. For new cat owners, or owners who "thought declawing was just what you do with cats," - they are the easiest to teach about alternatives, and these are usually new clients who LOVE us for educating them!

#### ***Is there anything else you would share with other veterinary professionals?***

I think if they are hesitant because of the same reasons we were initially (afraid they would go somewhere else and receive poor pain control/surgical technique), then you have to just commit, let go of that fear, and stick to your morals. We now know this is a bad procedure with terrible long-term consequences for the cat. The more practices that stop declawing, and the more owner educating we can do as a profession, then eventually we will make it all stop! Additionally, practices should not expect declaws to be an income generator; it's like a spay or neuter; once it's done, it's done, so it's not going to be a repeat source of income for a patient. I think owners will respect you more if you have good solid evidence as to why you don't perform them, especially if they trust that you have their pet's best interest at stake.

