

THE PET HEALTH LIBRARY

By Wendy C. Brooks, DVM, DipABVP

Educational Director, Veterinary Partner, com

Declawing and Its Alternatives

Declawing has probably become the most controversial of all the elective surgical procedures commonly performed by veterinarians. While it is normal for cats to scratch things (to mark territory as well as to condition their claws) this behavior can destroy the bond between an owner and pet cat. Cats, especially adolescent cats, have a tendency to play rough, scratching their owners or other pets in play, sometimes violently. Claws serve to mark territory and assist in communicating territorial messages to other cats though this behavior can be undesirable when it is directed against furniture. The declaw surgery represents a permanent solution to these problems; however, it is popularly held that a number of adverse conditions result from declawing, and that it is a form of mutilation. Pet owners need to sort out the facts from the rumors surrounding this procedure, as well as understanding all of the options involved.

Training: A Non-Surgical way to save the Furniture

Scratching is a natural behavior of cats, which makes it difficult to modify. The usual goal is to transfer the cat's scratching instinct to a scratching post; it is virtually impossible to control the desire to scratch completely. In general, this kind of training requires a great deal of time at home. Training tips include:

- Cats seem to prefer to scratch upholstery with a vertical drag to the fabric. Furniture can be upholstered in an unacceptable fabric and a scratching post can be swathed in an appropriate fabric (rather than the usual carpet).
- Furniture can be made unacceptable by using plastic or even aluminum foil to cover the target pieces. Spray-on antiperspirants can be sprayed on the furniture as a repellent. Double stick tape can be used on furniture to create an undesirable scratching area.
- Treats or catnip can be used to attract the cat to the scratching post.
- The cat can be punished for furniture scratching attempts but it is important that the cat not connect the punishment with the person administering it (otherwise the cat will simply learn not to scratch while that person is watching). Yelling, spanking, or shaking a can with pennies in it is too directly associated with the person rather than the act of scratching. A water squirt bottle is better but only if the cat does not see where the squirt comes from. Booby traps can be set up using balloons. If mouse traps are used, it is vital that they be turned upside-down so that the cat cannot possibly catch a foot in the trap. Stacked traps can be set up so that they pop upward when tripped, making a surprising noise. In this way, punishment can still be carried out when the owner is not at home.



Many owners are not excited about putting mousetraps up against their living room furniture, upholstering in aluminum foil, or decorating sofas and chairs with balloons. It is easy to see why a surgical solution would be attractive.

Nail Trimming

For some cats, simply keeping the nails short is adequate control.