Thinking about Declawing? Think again!

So, you've just added a new feline to your family. Congratulations! You're home will be filled with cat nip, toy mice and various other playthings. Eventually, you'll start thinking that, in order to save your furniture, you'll have your precious cat declawed. We'd like you reconsider.

The first thing you need to do is understand your cat's scratching habits. Cats scratch for various reasons, the first being grooming. When your cat scratches things, it's not really sharpening it's nails, it's actually trimming the outer sheaths of the claw. Secondly, scratching is a means of communication between cats. The feline paw has scent glands, and when they scratch, they are leaving a visual mark as well as their scent. Cats will also scratch things in front of other cats to communicate their dominance. Stretching is another reason a cat will scratch things. Cats will arch their back and stretch while scratching, providing exercise and a pleasurable experience while they do this instinctive behavior. Lastly, cats scratch during play.(1) All of these factors contribute to your cats physical and emotional well being.

The next thing you need to know about is exactly what happens when a cat is declawed. A major misconception the general public has about declawing is that it's just like having the cat's nails cut. Nothing could be further from the truth. Visualize this for a moment: a doctor tells you that he can amputate your fingers and toes up to the first joint. "Oh, you'll be just fine afterward!" he says. "You'll be able to use your hands and feet the same way you always have!" Would you consider having this procedure done?

When a cat is to be declawed, the procedure is generally performed as follows: The cat is given a general anesthetic. The fur around it's feet is clipped. A tourniquet is placed around the leg. The nails are rinsed with alcohol. The amputation of the nail is accomplished with a guillotine nail cutter, which cuts across the first joint and may also involve the foot pad. The toes are then bandaged tightly to prevent hemorrhage. The bandage is removed two to three days after the operation.(2)

Any time an animal has an invasive procedure such as this done, there is always a risk of complications. Immediately after the procedure, your cat runs the risk of physical problems, such as an adverse reaction to the anesthetic, infected, possibly gangrenous feet (that would result in in the amputation of the leg), and possible hemorrhaging after the bandages are removed. Your cat will also suffer emotional complications as general confusion as to why it's feet are bandaged, and why it feels pain when it tries to walk after the bandages are removed.

Your cat's suffering will not end there. Long term physical effects your cat will suffer could include claws that will regrow due to the nail bed not being entirely removed. If those nails regrow, they are usually brittle, which could cause the bone to shatter and cause a "sequestrum". This can cause infections and drainage from the toe, resulting in yet another
operation for your cat. Also, a declawed cat is basically a deformed, "club footed" cat. It will never be able to walk normally as it was meant to; instead, all of it's weight will be shifted to the backs of the foot pads, causing bad posture, and a weakening of it's back, leg and shoulder muscles. (3) The long term emotional effects are just as bad. Your feline family member can become very distrustful of you and your veterinarian. This will make your cat hard to handle or examine. (4) A declawed cat has a 75% decrease in it's defenses, making the animal very nervous. A nervous cat will do two things: bite and develop bladder problems (it will cease to use the litter box regularly). Both of these problems are attributed to the cat's insecurity. (5) Declawed cats also have a tenancy to develop many physical illnesses such as skin disorders. (6) Many people think that these are just temporary problems, and that their cat will be "back their old self" eventually, but they usually don't recover from this trauma. The owner will start seeing the animal's incontinence or behavioral problems as an inconvenience, and, many times, the cat will end up homeless and, eventually, euthanized, even though this is no fault of the animal.

There is hope for this wonderful creature. The best line of defense it will have is an educated owner. You already know why the cat scratches, now it is time for some training and patience.

Footnotes: (1) "Controlling Destructive Claw-sharpening Behavior in Cats" Author Unknown, courtesy of The Cat Doctor, Aurora, CO, from a pamphlet, copyright 1996
(2) "You Can't Declaw With Love" by Paul Rowen, DMV and Carole Wilbourn from "Cats Prefer It This Way" by Carole Wilbourn, copyright unknown.
(4) "You Can't Declaw With Love" by Paul Rowen, DMV and Carole Wilbourn from "Cats Prefer It This Way" by Carole Wilbourn, copyright unknown.
(5) "Declawing Your Cat" by Kris Field, from "Paws-a-tive News"
(6) "You Can't Declaw With Love" by Paul Rowen, DMV and Carole Wilbourn from "Cats Prefer It This Way" by Carole Wilbourn, copyright unknown.

Scratching Post Training

The first line of defense you have in the war on your cat's scratching problems is the ever trusty scratching post! Now, don't expect that just by bringing one home and setting it up in a corner that your cat will be scratching away at it immediately. You will need to train your cat to use it. Here are some helpful hints:

Get your cat's scent on the post. Bring your cat over to the scratching post. Then, gently spread your cat's claws and rub them against the post. Because your cat's scent is now on the post, it will be more attracted to it.

- **Use catnip on the post.** Cats love catnip! If you rub some on the post, your cat will be drawn to it.
- **Rope or carpet? Horizontal or vertical?** There are so many varieties of scratching posts out there that sometimes, just choosing one can be a test in patience! Go in to the store armed with your cat's scratching preference. Does it like to just scratch the carpet or a rug on the floor? Is it going for the arm of the sofa for a reaching stretch? Most often, a post that offers a variety of surfaces can be the best choice. Also, an
inexpensive gift for the cat that likes just carpet is a cheap household throw rug. If you have multiple cats, you may also need to consider how territorial they are. Not all cats like to share.

- **Post Placement.** A scratching post can make a great blocking device! Place it next to the arm of the couch that your cat prefers, or use it to block your stereo speaker. Place wherever your cat's favorite scratching place is. Also, which room you place it in can make a difference. If it is in the family room your cat may be more inclined to use it, as opposed to the laundry room.

Now you are on your way to having a happy home for both you and your cat. Your furniture will be saved, and your cat will get to indulge itself in its scratching habit!

**Information on this page courtesy of "Alternatives to Declawing" by Dr. Lauren Chattigre, DMV**

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**Other Training Aids**

There are other training aids that can be very useful when training your cat to use its scratching post and not your sofa. There are three things that are essential to any training program: **prevention, discipline, and reward.**

**Prevention:** Preventing your cat from going after your possessions can be accomplished in many different ways. There are a wide variety of sprays that can be purchased from your local pet store that will offend your cat enough that it will avoid your curtains or couch. These sprays have been formulated as to be safe to your furniture, and will not bother you at all. Also, cats do not like the smell of citrus, and will avoid it as well. Other ways you can deter your cat include wrapping it's favorite arm of the Lazy-Boy with aluminum foil. Cats don't like how foil feels, and will generally leave it in peace. If your feline is a bit more persistent, then use some double-sided sticky tape over the foil. The stickiness will serve as too much of an annoyance to your cat, so it will abandon its efforts. Now, you don't need to cover the entire area with the tape. Just make a crisscross with it on your cat's favorite spot. You can also obtain a product called "Sticky Paws" at your local pet store, which you can use on drapes and stereo speakers. If you catch your cat in the act of scratching, making a loud noise (such as a shaking a can full of coins) will help in training your cat. You should try and make the noise appear as though it is coming from the environment as opposed to you: if your cat believes the noise will happen any time it scratches, it will serve as a better deterrent. If your cat knows you are making the noise, it will just associate the noise with you, and scratch when you are not there. Some people also recommend the use of a spray bottle of water.

**Discipline:** The discipline aspect of your cat's training can be easily accomplished with a stern voice. Keep in mind at all times that when you do catch your cat scratching never yell at or hit your cat. This will just make it afraid of you, and cause you and your cat to have an unhealthy relationship.
**Reward**: Rewarding your cat for its good behavior should be the easiest part of its (and by now, your) training. Reward your cat with treats, quality playtime, and lots and lots of praise.

**Ideas in this article are courtesy of Dr. Lauren Chattigre, DMV, and The San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals**

You can also visit [www.stopdeclaw.com](http://www.stopdeclaw.com) for great advice and alternatives.

For important information from veterinarian, Dr. Christianne Schelling, please visit [www.declawing.com](http://www.declawing.com).