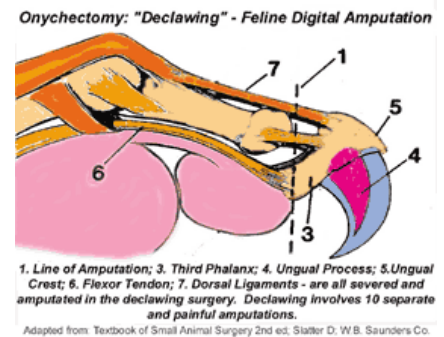


The Truth About Declawing

The Cat's Claws

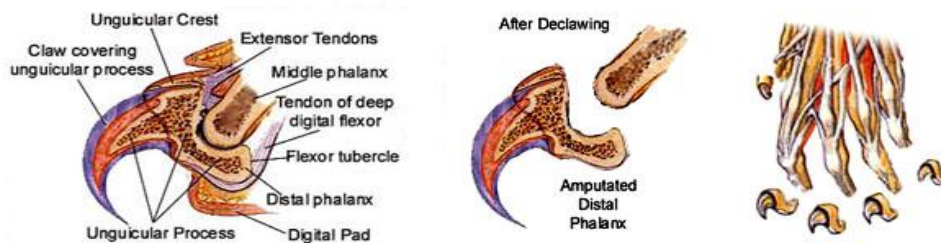
Unlike most mammals who walk on the soles of the paws or feet, cats are digitigrade, which means they walk on their toes. Their back, shoulder, paw and leg joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves are naturally designed to support and distribute the cat's weight across its toes as it walks, runs and climbs. A cat's claws are used for balance, for exercising, and for stretching the muscles in their legs, back, shoulders, and paws. They stretch these muscles by digging their claws into a surface and pulling back against their own clawhold - similar to isometric exercising for humans. This is the only way a cat can exercise, stretch and tone the muscles of its back and shoulders. The toes help the foot meet the ground at a precise angle to keep the leg, shoulder and back muscles and joints in proper alignment. Removal of the last digits of the toes drastically alters the conformation of their feet and causes the feet to meet the ground at an unnatural angle that can cause back pain similar to that in humans caused by wearing improper shoes.



Understanding Declawing (*Onychectomy*)

The anatomy of the feline claw must be understood before one can appreciate the severity of declawing. The cat's claw is not a nail as is a human fingernail, it is part of the last bone (distal phalanx) in the cat's toe. The cat's claw arises from the unguicular crest and unguicular process in the distal phalanx of the paw (see above diagram). Most of the germinal cells that produce the claw are situated in the dorsal aspect of the unguicular crest. This region must be removed completely, or regrowth of a vestigial claw and abscessation results. The only way to be sure all of the germinal cells are removed is to amputate the entire distal phalanx at the joint.

Contrary to most people's understanding, declawing consists of amputating not just the claws, but the whole phalanx (up to the joint), including bones, ligaments, and tendons! To remove the claw, the bone, nerve, joint capsule, collateral ligaments, and the extensor and flexor tendons must all be amputated. Thus declawing is not a "simple", single surgery but **10 separate**, painful amputations of the third phalanx up to the last joint of each toe. A graphic comparison in human terms would be the cutting off of a person's finger at the last joint of each finger.



Adapted from: Atlas of Feline Anatomy for Veterinarians; Hudson/Hamilton, W.B. Saunders Company

Many vets and clinic staff deliberately misinform and mislead clients into believing that declawing removes only the claws in the hopes that clients are left with the impression that the procedure is a "minor" surgery comparable to spay/neuter procedures and certainly doesn't involve amputation (partial or complete) of the terminal-toe bone, ligaments and tendons. Some vets rationalize the above description by saying that since the claw and the third phalanx (terminal toe bone) are so firmly connected, they simply use the expression "the claw" to make it simpler for clients to "understand". Other vets are somewhat more honest and state that if they used the word "amputation", most clients would not have the surgery performed! Onychectomy in the clinical definition involves either the partial or total amputation of the terminal bone. That is the only method. What differs from vet to vet is the type of cutting tool used (guillotine-type cutter, scalpel or laser).

Complications of Onychectomy (Declawing) Surgery



Adapted from Atlas of Feline Anatomy for Veterinarians; Hudson/Hamilton, W.B. Saunders Co.

Declawing is not without complication.

The rate of complication is relatively high compared with other so-called routine procedures. Complications of this amputation can be excruciating pain, damage to the radial nerve, hemorrhage, bone chips that prevent healing, painful regrowth of deformed claw inside of the paw which is not visible to the eye, and chronic back and joint pain as shoulder, leg and back muscles weaken.

Other complications include postoperative hemorrhage, either immediate or following bandage removal is a fairly frequent occurrence, paw ischemia, lameness due to wound infection or footpad laceration, exposure necrosis of the second phalanx, and abscess associated with retention of portions of the third phalanx. Abscess due to regrowth must be treated by surgical removal of the remnant of the third phalanx and wound debridement. During amputation of the distal phalanx, the bone may shatter and cause what is called a *sequestrum*, which serves as a focus for infection, causing continuous drainage from the toe. This necessitates a **second** anesthesia and surgery. Abnormal growth of severed nerve ends can also occur, causing long-term, painful sensations in the toes. Infection will occasionally occur when all precautions have been taken.

"Declawing is actually an amputation of the last joint of your cat's "toes". When you envision that, it becomes clear why declawing is not a humane act. It is a painful surgery, with a painful recovery period. And remember that during the time of recuperation from the surgery your cat would still have to use its feet to walk, jump, and scratch in its litter box regardless of the pain it is experiencing."

[Christianne Schelling, DVM](#)

"General anesthesia is used for this surgery, which always has a certain degree of risk of disability or death associated with it. Because declawing provides no medical benefits to cats, even slight risk can be considered unacceptable. In addition, the recovery from declawing can be painful and lengthy and may involve postoperative complications such as infections, hemorrhage, and nail regrowth. The latter may subject the cat to additional surgery." [The Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights \(AVAR\)](#)

Psychological & Behavioral Complications

Some cats are so shocked by declawing that their personalities change. Cats who were lively and friendly have become withdrawn and introverted after being declawed. Others, deprived of their primary means of defense, become nervous, fearful, and/or aggressive, often resorting to their only remaining means of defense, their teeth. In some cases, when declawed cats use the litterbox after surgery, their feet are so tender they associate their new pain with the box...permanently, resulting in a life-long aversion to using the litter box. Other declawed cats that can no longer mark with their claws, they mark with urine instead resulting in inappropriate elimination problems, which in many cases, results in relinquishment of the cats to shelters and ultimately euthanasia. Many of the cats surrendered to shelters are surrendered because of behavioral problems which developed **after** the cats were declawed.

Many declawed cats become so traumatized by this painful mutilation that they end up spending their maladjusted lives perched on top of doors and refrigerators, out of reach of real and imaginary predators against whom they no longer have any adequate defense. A cat relies on its claws as its primary means of defense. Removing the claws makes a cat feel defenseless. The constant state of stress caused by a feeling of defenselessness may make some declawed cats more prone to disease. Stress leads to a myriad of physical and psychological disorders including suppression of the immune system, cystitis and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

"The consequences of declawing are often pathetic. Changes in behavior can occur. A declawed cat frequently resorts to biting when confronted with even minor threats. Biting becomes an overcompensation for the insecurity of having no claws. Bungled surgery can result in the regrowth of deformed claws or in an infection leading to gangrene. Balance is affected by the inability to grasp with their claws. Chronic physical ailments such as cystitis or skin disorders can be manifestations of a declawed cat's frustration and stress"

[David E. Hammett, DVM](#)

Moral, Ethical and Humane Considerations

The veterinary justification for declawing is that the owner may otherwise dispose of the cat, perhaps cruelly. It is ethically inappropriate, in the long term, for veterinarians to submit to this form of moral blackmail from their clients.

"The Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights is opposed to cosmetic surgeries and to those performed to correct 'vices.' Declawing generally is unacceptable because the suffering and disfigurement it causes is not offset by any benefits to the cat. Declawing is done strictly to provide convenience for people.

[The Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights \(AVAR\)](#)

Some veterinarians have argued that some people would have their cats killed if declawing was not an option. We should not, however, allow ourselves to be taken 'emotional hostage' like this. If a person really would kill her or his cat in this case, it is reasonable to question the suitability of that person as a feline guardian, especially when there are millions of non-declawed cats living in harmony with people."

Most people are vehemently opposed to declawing due to a combination of reasons: 1) because the end (owner convenience) doesn't justify the means (causing unnecessary pain to the cat); 2) because other, less harmful alternatives to declawing exist and 3) because claws are part of the nature or "catness" of cats. Overall, the view is that it is ethically inappropriate to remove parts of an animal's anatomy, thereby causing the animal pain, merely to fit the owner's lifestyle, aesthetics, or convenience without any benefit to the cat. It should be emphasized that "most people" includes virtually the entire adult population of Europe and many other countries around the world.

Many countries are particularly concerned about animal welfare and have banned declawing as abusive and causing unnecessary pain and suffering with no benefit to the cat. One highly regarded veterinary textbook by Turner and Bateson on the biology of cat behavior concludes a short section on scratching behavior with the following statement: *"The operative removal of the claws, as is sometimes practiced to protect furniture and curtains, is an act of abuse and should be forbidden by law in all, not just a few countries."*

The following is a partial list of countries in which declawing cats is either illegal or considered extremely inhumane and only performed under extreme medical circumstances:

England - Scotland - Wales - Italy - Austria - Switzerland - Norway - Sweden - Ireland - Denmark - Finland - Slovenia - Brazil - Australia - New Zealand - Yugoslavia - France - Germany - Bosnia - Malta - Netherlands - Northern Ireland - Portugal - Belgium - Israel