

## Declawing Your Cat

The decision to declaw your cat can be a difficult and emotional dilemma. There are many opinions on the subject ranging from adamantly against the procedure, citing cruelty, to a necessity to ensure cats don't wind up on the street or in shelters. Education on the matter is the best way to ensure that an informed decision is made, and that the cat is not subjected to inhumane treatment. Advancements in pain management techniques have improved declawing outcomes greatly, and tens of thousands of declawed cats live comfortable, normal lives with no ill effect from the procedure.

Cats have retractable claws. Their "fingers" have three bones and joints just like ours. The individual bones are called phalanges. Human fingers can only be flexed toward the palm and relaxed into a straight, pointing position. The last or third phalanx of a cat can be extended upward as well as flexed downward. At rest, the third phalanx and toenail are retracted upward off of the ground. This means the cat does not bear weight on the last bone while standing. For this reason, the last bone can be amputated without affecting the cat's ability to stand. This is not as true for the rear feet, because most cats bear partial weight on the rear third phalanges. And, when propelling themselves forward, the rear toes flex downward in order to gain traction. Most veterinarians agree that cats' rear feet should not be declawed. Most complications occur from declawing the rear feet.

Declawing is a surgical procedure performed under a general anesthetic. Pre-operative blood work is done to rule out subclinical infection, anemia, and clotting deficiency. There are several techniques employed to declaw a cat. It is up to the veterinarian to choose the technique with which they are most comfortable and familiar. The doctor may use a scalpel, a guillotine blade, or a laser to perform the amputation of the third phalanx. The incision may either be sutured or closed with tissue adhesive. The feet are then wrapped with a light compression bandage and the cat is confined to cage rest for 12 to 24 hours after surgery.

The pain management protocol that is used during a declaw greatly influences the outcome, both short-term and long-term, after surgery. The specific drugs and techniques are again up to the veterinarian. Opiates such as Fentanyl, morphine, and buprenorphine are given before surgery to block pain and provide a comfortable recovery. Injections may be repeated after the declaw, and they are sometimes combined with an NSAID injection to utilize a multi-modal approach to pain control. Carpal ring blocks and digital blocks provide analgesia by injecting long-acting local anesthetics like bupivacaine around the regional nerves associated with the feet. This can last for as long as 8 hours after surgery. A Fentanyl trans-dermal patch or oral opiates are sent home with the cat to provide extended pain control. Symptoms of pain include hiding and refusing food. Be sure to let your veterinarian know if you suspect your cat is in pain.

Complications from declawing can be bleeding, infection, limping, and re-growth of the toenail when the nail bed was not adequately excised.