WHY CATS NEED THEIR CLAWS

CLAWS ARE IMPORTANT TO A CAT

A cat’s remarkable grace and agility, its faultless sense of balance, are to a great  
 extent due to its retractable claws, which allow it to establish footing for walking,   
 running, springing, climbing, or stretching. A cat’s claws are also its best defense mechanism.

THE NEED TO SCRATCH

The outer parts of a cat’s claws regularly become frayed. When a cat scratches, it pulls off the outer part and exposes sharp, smooth claws. Scratching is also a way of fulfilling the cat’s strong instinctive need to mark its territory. Not only does a cat mark an object visibly by scratching it, but the scratching deposits secretions from glands in the feet that can be smelled by other cats. Scratching may also serve psychological and physiological needs by providing comfort and expression in kneading, and allowing valuable stretching and foot-muscle exercise.

THE DECLAWING PROCEDURE

The standard declawing procedure calls for the removing of the claw, the cells at the base responsible for the growth, and part or all of the terminal bone to the toe. The operation is usually performed on the front feet. It is actually an amputation comparable to the removal of the fingers of the human hand at the last knuckle. The cat experiences considerable pain in the recovery and healing process.

THE RISK OF DECLAWING

Medical

In addition to the need for general anesthesia, which always presents a certain degree of risk to the patient’s health and life, infection and blood loss are possible surgical complications of declawing. An incorrectly positioned cut can remove too much of the toe, taking with it part or the toe’s entire pad. But if the whole claw is not removed, misshapen claws can grow back, requiring additional surgery. If a cat’s nail is brittle or the trimmer is dull, 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. Great care must be taken after surgery that bandages wrapped tightly to control bleeding do not cut off circulation.

Behavioral

Although no definite studies have been conducted on the effects of declawing, owners and veterinarians have noticed personality changes in some declawed cats. Formerly lively, friendly animals have become withdrawn or introverted. Others, deprived of their primary form of defense, become nervous, fearful, and/ or aggressive, often using their only remaining defense, their teeth. The constant state of stress caused by a feeling of defenselessness may make some declawed cats more prone to disease. Some cats stop using their litter pan; this may be associated to the discomfort of scratching in their litter after the surgery.

Safety

A declawed cat must never be allowed outdoors; its ability to defend itself or escape from danger has been seriously impaired. Even indoors, a cat without claws faces dangers. One physical effect of declawing is a gradual weakening of the muscles of the legs, shoulders, and back; balance is impaired. This combined with the fact that despite its grace, a cat’s surefootedness depends on the ability to grasp quickly with its claws, means that a declawed animal can easily be injured in a fall.

INSTEAD OF DECLAWING

Introduce a Scratching Post

Buy or make a scratching post that’s tall enough so the cat cans scratch completely when scratching, and stable enough so it won’t wobble when it’s being used. It should be covered with a heavy, rough fiber like the backside of carpeting. Place the post in an accessible area. If you’re trying to discourage the cat form scratching a particular piece of furniture, try placing the post in front of the cat, gradually moving the post aside as the cat begins to use it regularly.

Train with a dual approach: discourage the cat from clawing the wrong things, encourage the cat to claw the right things. If the cat begins to scratch the furniture, firmly tell it “NO”, and move the cat to the scratching post. Put its front legs up on the post and make scratching motions with them. Or keep a squirt gun filled with plain water handy and squirt the cat on the back when is claws the furniture. Each time you bring it to the post or as it goes on its own, praise your cat, pet it, and spend a minute playing at the post. Try rubbing the post with catnip’ make it a fun place to be. At the same time, the favorite furniture scratching area can be made less attractive by attaching tape that is sticky on both sides or a piece of cotton scented with bath oils to the furniture

Keeping The Cat’s Nail’s trimmed

Cutting the nails regularly may help keep a cat from scratching the furniture, or at least reduce the damage done by its scratching. Get your kitten used to having its nails clipped while it is young. With an older cat, it may help to begin by handling the cat’s feet under pleasurable circumstances. Then begin to introduce the clipping procedure by approaching the cat while it’s relaxed or even napping and clip only one nail per session. Praise your cat and reward it with a treat.

If you’re in doubt about what the proper nail length looks like, have your veterinarian trim the nails once. The only equipment necessary is a good pair of nail clippers and a nail file or emery board to gently round off any rough edges. Never use scissors, since they can tear the nail. Hold the clippers perpendicular to the nail you will be trimming and slide the blade onto the nail. Before cutting, look for the pink “quick” that runs down the center of the nail. The clipper blade should be placed about an eighth of an inch forward of the quick, and the nail clipped with one smooth squeezing action of the clippers. Be extremely careful not to cut into the quick. If this happens, the cat will experience pain, and bleeding is likely. The bleeding may stop without assistance, or you may need to hold a soft cloth to the nail or apply a little styptic powder. If you trim a small amount of the nail on a regular basis, the quick will actually tend to recede.

We hope this helps you better understand the Helen Woodward Animal Center’s policy against declawing cats. Please do not hesitate to contact us at 858.756.4117 if you have questions about declawing or training your cat. With proper care and guidance, you and your cat can enjoy a full, healthy life together without risk to your furniture or home.