

# CRITTER KEEPER

*Willamette Valley Animal Hospital*



## The Truth About: Declawing

FEBRUARY 2010  
ISSUE 6

### Super Savings

#### Microchip Monday

Permanent, un-lose-able ID. Inserted and registered for just \$14 all day!

#### Toenail Tuesday

Stop that annoying clicking across the kitchen! Nail trims for cats are just \$6.50, only \$7.50 for dogs!

#### Wonderful Wednesday

See a vet for anything! Pay just \$14.25 for the exam all day!

#### TGI Thursday

Super discounts on vaccines for your pets from 1 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. every week! Rabies vaccine only \$5!

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Anal gland expressions only \$8.75!  
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Need flea products today? We can do that, too. Get both and SAVE \$5!

### TO DECLAW, OR NOT TO DECLAW...

Cats seem like a low maintenance pet when one gets to thinking about the day-to-day routine of a dog. Dogs are the dependent sort that crave the attention and presence of their people, require significant play time, daily walks, regular trips to the "bathroom" and ample amounts of chew toys, balls, frisbees, blankets...you get my drift.

Cats, as a whole, require much less of us mere humans. As long as her people keep the litter box clean, keep food her bowl and pet her when she wants attention, Fluffy is pretty darn content to just lounge around all day. On those rare occasions when Fluffy needs to express herself, she may end up doing some damage if her self

entertainment involves her primal need to scratch. Cats in general use their claws to scratch and climb, defend and hunt. The displaying of claws and objects scratching could also be considered a social behavior of our feline family members. Outdoor cats may scratch at trees to mark their territory and to remove the worn outer layers of their claws. Unfortunately, this can become an issue when your indoor cat chooses your furniture or curtains as tree substitutes.

#### What Are My Options?

A variety of options are available to help you save your furniture and your sanity. Some owners choose declawing as a means to end destructive scratching at home. In the veterinary



world, declawing could be seen as controversial, as it provides no health benefit to the cat and is done strictly for human benefit. Those who are vehemently opposed to declawing say it is cruel, unnatural and causes psychological damage to the cat.

Those not so opposed to the idea say that declawing has no more negative effects than any other surgical procedure, and that by ridding unwanted behavior, it could increase the chances for a cat to enjoy a safe, permanent indoor home.

To help you caring cat owners decide the best option for you, I've provided some facts on declawing and on alternative methods that address the issue of destructive scratching by house cats.



### **Traditional Declaw**

Declawing is an irreversible surgical procedure performed by a veterinarian while your cat is under general anesthesia. Hospitalization for two days is required at our practice to ensure the safety and well-being of Kitty. The back feet are rarely used for scratching (except as a defense), so only the front feet are declawed.

A cat's toe has three bones, much like a human finger; the claw grows from the end of the last bone. This bone is not weight bearing, it is retractable. In declawing, the veterinarian amputates this bone, along with the nail. This removes the claw and prevents it from growing back. Each toe is then closed with surgical skin glue and each paw is bandaged snugly to control bleeding. Surgical pain is managed with three kinds of pain medication as well as local nerve blocks for the best pain control we can deliver. Bandages are removed in one day. The cats are continued on narcotic pain medication for two more days.

Declawed cats require special care after the surgery. An injection of pain medication is administered before surgery and controls pain for three to five days.

Although difficult to do, you need to restrict Kitty's activity, especially jumping, for several days. Until healing is complete (about 14 days), Kitty should be kept indoors, and shredded newspaper or non-granular litter should be used.

Complication rates are very low if the procedure is performed properly. Most cats will walk fairly well within two to three days, although the feet will be tender for a week or two after surgery. The cat should be seen by a veterinarian if any of these signs occur: swelling, discharge from the toes, loss of appetite or some other change in the cat's health or behavior.

It is normal for a cat to initially limp or favor a paw following surgery. However, make sure to contact the veterinarian if this behavior stops and then resumes again.

Additionally, keep aware of bleeding. Although some spotting after surgery may occur and is normal, if bleeding continues, the cat should be rechecked by the doctor.

### **\*\*What to Expect\*\***

Two nights in the hospital are required for this procedure (one night with bandages and one without).

Some spotting of blood is normal from the toes during the first few days at home, beware if you have white carpet!

Shredded paper or pelleted recycled newspaper litter (such as Yesterday's News or Good Mews) is recommended for 14 days after surgery. Conventional clay (clumping or not) or sand litters can get inside the tiny incisions and cause infections.

### **Laser Declaw**

Laser surgery is another option and the only way we declaw cats at Willamette Valley Animal Hospital. Surgical lasers have been used for several years at veterinary colleges and have recently become an affordable option for veterinary hospitals to offer to clients.

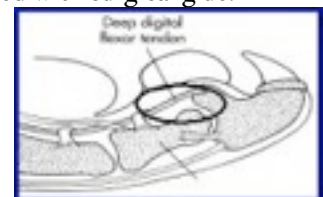
A laser declaw surgery requires the same anesthesia and amputation of the bone and nails as described above, however, a surgical laser can offer several advantages over a scalpel. As it cuts, the laser automatically seals small blood vessels and nerve endings around the cut, which means less bleeding, less swelling, and less pain, so Kitty returns to her normal activities sooner. It's best to declaw cats at a young age, about four to five months old. Younger, smaller cats tend to recover more quickly and adapt more easily to the loss of their claws.

Most declawed cats will resume normal activities, including performing scratching motions. With rear claws intact, cats can still climb small trees, hunt and even defend themselves when necessary.

### **Tendonectomy**

Flexor tendonectomy is also a surgical option for you. A tendonectomy leaves the claws intact but prevents cats from extending them. The tendon controlling claw extension is cut and a small portion removed while the cat is under general anesthesia.

Because the incisions needed for this particular procedure are so small, recovery time is minimal. No bandages, no special litter, no blood spotting and usually no stitches to remove as the tiny incisions are sealed with surgical glue.



After a tendonectomy, owners MUST monitor the cat's toenails and keep them clipped, because the cat's ability to shed and sharpen the claws is limited.

While we have performed this procedure in the past, at WVAH we no longer recommend it due to poor client compliance with regular nail trimming. Because the cat can no longer flex and retract their claws, many owners don't notice the growth of their claws - this has frequently

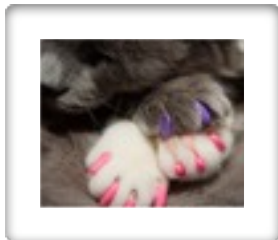
become a problem. Over the couple of years that we performed this surgery (in an attempt to minimize trauma to the patients!), too many cats returned to us with claws so long that they were growing into their pads, causing severe damage, pain and infection in the feet. We no longer recommend or perform this procedure.

### **Nail Trimming**

Regular nail trimming can often diminish the destruction caused by your cat's scratching. This is a relatively simple task that you can do yourself, but it must be performed properly and routinely. Ask your veterinarian to show you how to trim your cat's nails, or simply bring Kitty in and let us take care of everything, any day of the week. Toenail Tuesdays mean half price nail trims all day!

### **Claw "Caps"**

Nail coverings, such as "Soft Paws", attach to trimmed claws with a nontoxic adhesive and provide a blunt nail tip so scratching does not cause damage.



The nail caps will wear off but not at the same time. After a couple of weeks some of the nails will be capped and others will not be, the nail caps must be replaced as the nail grows out.

So about once a month (time between applications varies), the coverings must be removed, the nails trimmed, and new coverings applied. You can do this yourself or have it done at your veterinarian's office for a nominal fee.

Keep in mind that some cats will not be the least bit discouraged from scratching by these caps and are able to simply scratch larger holes in the upholstery!

### **Behavior Training**

Training your cat to scratch only certain objects, such as scratching posts, can often be accomplished.

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:**

- 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 surfaces can be made unacceptable by using plastic or even aluminum foil to cover the target pieces. Spray-on feline repellent products can be sprayed on the furniture as a deterrent. Double stick tape can also 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 not the same as punishing a dog. With cats, it is important that Kitty 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 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.

### **Myth Busting**

**Myth #1:** After declawing, a cat is likely to become fearful or experience behavior changes that impair an affectionate relationship with its owner.

Numerous scientific studies have been unable to document any behavior changes post-declaw. In fact, in one survey 70% of owners of declawed cats reported an improved relationship with their cat after the procedure.

**Myth #2:** A declawed cannot climb trees.

While declawed cats are not as effective at climbing trees as cats with claws, declawing does not prevent tree climbing. Yes, cats are just that clever.

**Myth #3:** A declawed cat cannot catch prey.

Declawed cats are not as effective at catching prey as cats with claws but declawing does not prevent effective hunting, just ask the field mice.

**Myth #4:** A declawed cat cannot defend itself and should not be allowed outside.

This one is variably true. Without front claws a cat has indeed lost a part of its defense system, but can still use teeth and hind feet. The vets and staff of Willamette Valley Animal Hospital feel that declawed cats should be ideally kept indoors.

**Myth #5:** Declawed cats are more likely to bite.

Declawed cats do not seem to realize they have no claws. They will continue to scratch as if they do not know the difference. Studies have shown no increased biting tendency after declawing.

**Myth #6:** The post-operative period is very painful.

The declawed cat will have sore feet after surgery. The larger the cat, the more the discomfort and reluctance to bear weight. Pain relievers are given. However, this recovery period should not last longer than a week or so with healing complete by two weeks. Pain after this recovery period is not normal or expected! If a declawed cat seems to uncomfortable, return to your vet.

**Myth #7:** A declawed cat will no longer use the litter box.

It is very important that litter not get impacted in the declaw incisions during the recovery period! The recycled newspaper litters are an excellent alternative and the only litter problem could be lack of acceptance of a new litter during the recovery period. Declawed cats do not lose their litter box instinct.

*Frustrated cat owners, I bestow this knowledge upon you with the hope that you find some small glimmer of hope in your frayed furniture life.*

*-Wendee*

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-WVAH-



Kitties invaded this issue!  
\*rawr\*



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