

CLAW COUNSELING:

Helping clients live alongside cats with claws

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Onychectomy has always been a controversial topic, but over the last decade, a large push to end this practice has been brought forward by many groups, including major veterinary organizations, such as the American Association of Feline Practitioners. As veterinary professionals, we may be asked about declawing, nail care, and normal scratching behavior in cats. Whether you are in a practice that still offers onychectomy or in a practice that does not, owners should be made aware that declawing is surgical amputation of the last toe bone, and that there are both short and long term side effects from this procedure, including acute and chronic pain, as well as behavior problems.¹ The most effective way to help clients is to comprehend normal scratching behavior in cats and to become well versed in normal scratching preferences.

Pulling this knowledge together, veterinary team members have the capacity to develop 'Claw Counseling' programs for their clinic that promote living in harmony with clawed cats. More than just understanding why declaw is not an acceptable procedure, 'Claw Counseling' is about moving forward in positive action by teaching clients that they can live in harmony with their clawed cat. Declawing is banned in dozens of countries world wide, and the majority of veterinarians in the US and Canada rarely declaw cats^{2,3} so we know this is possible. How do we re-set thinking, and reduce the desire for and pursuit of onychectomy by cat owners? The best way is to provide support. This includes a comprehensive approach to nail care, meeting each cat's essential environmental needs and managing their resources. More information can be found in the AAFP/ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines and the associated brochure provided for clients:

- www.catvets.com/environmental-guidelines
- www.catvets.com/environmental-brochure

A brief word of advice: If you practice in a clinic that still

offers onychectomy, open dialogue about this is strongly encouraged. Team members should be mindful that these discussions should be approached with care and respect, for themselves and their employer. It is also extremely important to include front office staff in these discussions, as they may receive direct questions by phone.

Why do cats scratch?

The cat claw is unique anatomically, in that the claws of the forelimb are retractable, allowing the cat to expose or retract their claws as needed. A cat exposes its claws for several reasons. When hunting, the cat will use the claws to grasp prey. During times of conflict with other cats or other animals, the cat may use its claws to defend itself. Lastly, the claws will need to be exposed for the purpose of scratching

inanimate objects for scent and visual marking. Outdoors this may include trees, fences and other solid surfaces. Indoors, it includes scratching posts (Figure 1) and other suitable scratching surfaces. However, if posts are not desirable to the cat, or if the cat is anxious or distressed, it may scratch furniture, doorframes, walls, or carpet. Scratching inanimate objects serves

three main purposes. The first is to sharpen the claw by dislodging the old nail. The second purpose is for marking. In this latter case, the claws do not always need to be exposed. The cat is using the paw pads to mark surfaces with pheromones, in order to communicate its presence and



Figure 1 Indoors, cats may scratch furniture, doorframes, walls, carpet and hopefully, their scratch post.

ownership of territory to other cats. Scratch marks also communicate visual markers of territory. Cats also scratch after waking from sleep as a means of stretching out the limbs. It is important to understand these behaviors, as they are natural and necessary to the cat. As a territorial behavior, increased scratching and marking may occur in times of anxiety and stress, including inter-cat conflict or when environmental resources are threatened or restricted.⁴ Identification of the cause of the anxiety or stress is likely to offer solutions that will lead to a reduction in the unwanted marking behavior.

Why do clients declaw?

While some cat owners are opposed to declawing, others are not educated about the procedure and the alternatives. The primary reason that cat owners decide to declaw is to protect furniture and belongings from the damage caused by scratching (Figure 2). Parents of young children may feel that they need to declaw their cat in order to protect their families from cat scratches.⁵ Clients may also be trying to protect sick and/or elderly family members.⁴ Clients may cite the transmission of disease through cat scratches as a reason for declawing. There may be cats in the house that were previously declawed and the client may feel that it is not 'fair' to the declawed cats to have to live with a clawed cat. So what are the realities when it comes to cats and scratching? How real are any of the above arguments?

If properly trained, cats can learn not to scratch items such as furniture, door jams, doors and walls. With the provision of ample environmental resources, including scratching surfaces, this is less likely to be an issue. Adjustment of environments to address inter-cat competition for resources and inter-cat aggression will also reduce this favorably. Protecting children and family members from cat scratches is accomplished through proper handling of the cat, avoiding rough play and trimming the nails regularly. Children should be taught to treat their cat with respect and to play with the cat with an interactive toy. Hands, fingers, toes, and feet should never be used as "toys," as this may give a signal to the cat that it is "OK" to scratch and/or bite human flesh. Young children should have adult supervision when interacting with an animal.



Figure 2 The primary reason that cat owners decide to declaw is to protect furniture and belongings from the damage caused by scratching. Photo courtesy of Dr. Karol Matthews.

Diseases that can be transmitted via scratches include cat-scratch fever (*Bartonella henselae*). This bacteria is carried by fleas and transmitted via blood. In infected or carrier cats, the bacteria can be found on the claws, posing a risk of infecting humans. Declaw is not an acceptable method of preventing transmission of Cat Scratch Fever, nor does the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommend it to prevent the transmission of Cat Scratch Fever. The CDC does not recommend declawing to protect immune compromised people. Instead, the CDC and veterinarians recommend regular nail trims, regular flea prevention, and avoiding rough play with cats. Owners should be educated to use an interactive toy and never to play with their hands, or by wiggling hands or feet.

Lastly, existing declawed cats are not at a major disadvantage in the presence of clawed cats. Attention to resource management and addressing any inter-cat issues as they arise is the best means to maintaining harmony. Fights between cats should always be of concern, regardless of whether cats are declawed. It is easy to see that the many arguments presented as reasoning for pursuing declaw are

unfounded. Discussing these and informing clients of appropriate recommendations is key. For many clients, once the realities of the surgery are explained, and once they understand there are ways to live in harmony with clawed cats, their desire to pursue declaw diminishes greatly.

What is a declaw surgery?

It is important for the veterinary team to recognize that many clients do not understand the surgical procedure of onychectomy. Frequently the procedure is not explained in detail, and many clients have a notion of 'magical' removal of the nail only. Clients need to understand that the surgery involves removal of the third phalanx of each digit, and that surgically this is classified as an amputation. They need to be aware that during the procedure a piece of each digit is surgically removed. They need to understand that skin, nerves, tendons and other soft tissues are cut during the surgery. Clients that do not understand the surgical procedure may be very upset after the fact, when they discover what they have agreed to do to their cat. In the author's experience, many clients with declawed cats have indicated that had they understood what was involved, they would not have proceeded. This is particularly upsetting for them when their cats are experiencing short and/or long term complications from the declawing surgery. As veterinary professionals, we all need to be forthcoming about what is actually being done to a cat during a surgical procedure, the level of acute pain associated with surgery, as well as the potential for chronic pain. Declawing causes more acute pain than most other surgical procedures because it involves surgical manipulation of bone. Have an open dialogue with your entire veterinary team so that your procedures are clearly laid out for all, including who will explain what declaw entails, alternatives to declawing, and normal scratching behaviors to clients.

What are the short and long-term complications?

Although all surgical procedures deliver some level of pain, onychectomy is a highly painful surgical procedure. Until relatively recently, there was a lack of awareness of the high level of acute pain and the potential for chronic pain with

onychectomy, despite the use of perceived adequate analgesia. During the amputation, soft tissue is cut, including skin, nerves, blood vessels, tendons and joint capsules. In some cases paw pads and bone tissue may be erroneously cut. Some patients have had the distal ends of P2 incised by accident, and rare patients may have damage to both P2 and P1. Veterinarians may leave fragments of P3 in situ and some



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veterinarians leave these fragments, not recognizing the pain risks, potential for abnormal growth of the nail or the potential for infection. Hemorrhage is a risk with most surgical methods. Although laser decreases the risk of hemorrhage, tissue burns may occur. It is important to note that while laser declaw may slightly reduce short term post-operative discomfort, studies have shown that after 3-5 days, there is no difference in the level of pain between cats declawed by laser or by other methods.^{6,7} Post-operative bandaging compromises blood flow and could lead to permanent damage of the blood-deprived limb. Suture materials and tissue adhesives may act as foreign body irritants. Postoperatively, declawed cats are at risk for hemorrhage, infection, wound dehiscence, reaction to closure material (suture or tissue adhesives), neurological pain, pain from P3 fragments and generalized post-operative pain. Any of these short-term issues may predispose to long-term chronic debilitation and pain.

Long-term issues include arthritis and osteomyelitis of the remaining digit, P3 remnant pain, P3 remnant regrowth and/or tendon contracture.^{8,9,10} As amputees, it is almost certain that some portion of these cats experience phantom amputee pain at some point in their lives post onychectomy. Phantom pain can occur as many as 10 years after amputation in humans, so it is realistic to expect that cats may develop this type of pain in the years following surgery.¹¹ In relation to some of these long-term problems, it is hypothesized that some cats may experience discomfort digging in cat litter, and therefore may house soil; others may become aggressive due to pain related to ambulation and/or handling.³

What causes cats to scratch excessively and/or inappropriately?

First and foremost, cats scratch to mark territory. Anything that is occurring in a cat's life that may pose a threat to their territory can be expected to result in an increase in territorial marking.⁴ Behavioral consultations for scratching that owners consider 'inappropriate' should include very thorough questioning about the environment. The presence of other pets in the home should lead to a complete evaluation of inter-cat and cat-dog issues. The client should be questioned about the presence of outdoor animals, particularly cats, as these may be a stressor for their cat. As such, the indoor cat will begin to mark their territory more often and potentially in an increased number of locations. Frequent comings and goings of adults and teenagers, as well as the presence of children, will disturb the cat's environment. New furniture, renovations and other dramatic changes will act as a disturbance to the cat. It is less than ideal if there are any changes in the cat's day-to-day schedule of feeding, sleeping, and play. Anxieties can arise from any of these disturbances. Cats that are not well stimulated mentally will also be more inclined to mark territory. Use of scheduled play-time, as well as feeding toys and other puzzles will be beneficial in keeping the mind stimulated and boredom minimized.¹² Behavioral consultations should work through all of these possibilities, in order to identify all possible problems.

Resource management in a multi-pet environment is critical to reducing territorial anxiety in cats. While litter box resources are often considered during house soiling consultations, these represent only one facet of household resources that are important to indoor cats:

- Litter boxes
- Sleeping and resting areas
- Food
- Water
- Appropriate toys and interactive play
- Perches
- Scratch posts
- Scratching surfaces
- Human attention if desired

Litter boxes should be provided at a ratio of ~1 litter box per cat plus one additional box. The boxes should not be located

in the same space, and not all on the same level of the house. Suitable box size unscented clumping sand litter substrate and uncovered boxes should be used. A minimum of once daily scooping of the boxes is necessary, with complete cleaning every 1-4 weeks.

Sleeping and resting locations should be ample to accommodate all cats in a variety of locations. Most cats do not wish to sleep close to other cats, which means that there should be sleeping and resting locations for each cat and these should be distributed widely throughout the household. When environments are stressful (multiple cat households where cats don't show social bonding – grooming and resting touching one another), places to hide are important. Good options are high sided or igloo cat beds or boxes with the opening placed on a side.

Some of the scratch posts and perches should be located near windows to allow the cat to visualize outdoor activities such as birds and squirrels. This is mentally stimulating for the cat. In cases where outdoor cats or animals are causing territorial anxiety, the yard view may need to be blocked temporarily. Other scratching surfaces should be located near sleeping spots, so that the cat that wishes to scratch and stretch after a nap has immediate access to an acceptable scratching surface. Placing scratching surfaces in both busy and quiet areas of the household, with multiple locations to scratch is helpful for cats that routinely enjoy the human family. For most cats, catnip and catnip spray should help to encourage use of these articles. It is important to note that most kittens under four months of age will not respond to catnip and some adult cats are actually non-responders.

Food can be a major source of anxiety in multi-cat households. Ideally, cats should be fed 3-4 meals a day, and within separate rooms. Cats fed within visual, olfactory and/or auditory distance of each other may actually experience anxiety as they eat. This may not be obvious to the client, as signs can be subtle. This can lead to increased food consumption as well as rapid food intake, neither of which are beneficial to the cat. The client should ensure that one cat is not bullying the other cat away from its food. Water bowls need to be distributed throughout the household as well. Toys should be ample in number, with types of toys being rotated every week if at all possible.



Figure 3 The client should provide a number of substrates including sisal rope, natural bark or wood, corrugated cardboard, and carpet.

What is the ideal scratching surface?

The answer to this question may be as individual as the cat. However, in a recent study, most cats 9 years of age and younger preferred sisal rope to other scratching substrates.⁴ There was a slight preference in cats 10 and older for carpet, then followed by sisal rope. Whereas some recommend offering a wide variety of options, others recommend starting with sisal rope and inexpensive cardboard scratchers. To provide multiple options, the client should provide substrates including sisal rope, natural bark or wood, corrugated cardboard and carpet/rough fabric (Figure 3). Scratching posts should be placed in a wide variety of locations, and include both vertical and horizontal options. Use of scratching posts and sisal rope as the preferred substrate increased with a higher number of posts within the home.⁴ Vertical options must be sturdy and extend above the cat's stretched out vertical height. An internet based-survey on feline scratching behaviors noted the ideal scratch post was found to be a simple upright structure with 2-3 levels, at least 3 feet tall.⁴ A list of recommended scratch substrates, surfaces and their locations should be provided and discussed with the client. Provision of additional surfaces and structures will need to be considered when insufficient options are available.

What are alternatives to declawing?

As we work with clients to teach them about the reasons for opposition to onychectomy, we also need to move forward with them in a positive manner, teaching them how to live in harmony with a clawed cat. Clinics may wish to provide regular nail trims at a discounted rate or for free. The client may wish to learn how to trim nails, and may need some assistance in this, as well as how often to do this and how to approach nail trims with their individual cat (Figure 4). Nail trimming should be conducted according to feline friendly handling techniques. Instruct clients to trim a few nails at a time as opposed to all nails at once to prevent struggling and other difficulties.

Emphasize the need for practice and patience, as well as to start slow, offer breaks, and make it a familiar routine. Distract with and encourage the use of positive reinforcement with food rewards. Some clients are very adept at learning clicker training for their cats, which may be very helpful.



Figure 4 The client may wish to learn how to trim nails, and may need some assistance in this, as well as how often to do this and how to approach nail trims with their individual cat.

The application of temporary synthetic nail caps is an alternative that may appeal to some clients and works well for some cats (Figure 5). This is not for every patient, as some resent the application process, and some will remove all of the caps in a short amount of time. Clients may learn to apply caps on their own, or the clinic may offer this as a service to their clients.



Figure 5 The application of temporary synthetic nail caps is an alternative that may appeal to some clients and works well for some cats.

Surgical tenectomy has been performed as an alternative to declawing but is no longer recommended. The procedure prevents extraction of the claws by surgical resection of a fragment of the deep digital flexor tendon. As a result of not being able to extract their claws, cats are unable to scratch



Figure 6 Cats that have been subjected to tenectomy will be unable to extract their claws, resulting in an inability to scratch away the rough old claw surface. A thick, abnormal nail then develops.

away the rough old claw surface. A thick, abnormal nail then develops (Figure 6) which is painful to walk with and painful to trim. These cats still require nail trims, which become more challenging than normal nail trims because of the painful, thick claws.

Claw Counseling

We need to be available for our clients to provide

support as we advocate for the cat and its claws. Perhaps your client wants to prepare in advance of obtaining a cat, adding a cat to the household or wanting to train their cat or kitten. Perhaps your client is experiencing new challenges that were not previously present. A designated individual, or all team members, should become actively involved in 'Claw Counseling.' 'Claw Counseling' refers to a consultation whereby we address the situation, including sources of feline anxiety (recent and long-term), current resources (all resources, not just scratching posts), how to trim nails and/or apply temporary synthetic nail caps and how to train cats to scratch only surfaces clients consider undesirable.

Punishment in any form can increase the anxiety of the cat, potentially increasing scratching and other marking behaviors, and causing them to be fearful of people. We need to keep this in mind when discussing scratching of undesirable surfaces with our clients. Discussing where the cat is scratching furniture may help reveal what the threat is that is making the cat feel the need to reinforce territorial markings. Similarly, it may also indicate the optimal locations for cat scratching posts and other acceptable surfaces. The placement of two-sided sticky tape, tinfoil, plastic, or furniture covers may reduce scratching on surfaces owners want protected. Cats that like to chew plastic should not have access to that type of surface cover.

If the cat has selected several surfaces that the client does not wish to have scratched, an attempt can be made to make these surfaces less desirable. Any changes should not cause pain to or encompass punishment of the cat. There are

scratch surfaces available commercially that can be mounted on the arms of couches allowing cats to scratch these instead of the actual couch. Scratchers can also be placed in front of the object to redirect the scratching. Some changes may not be 'tasteful' to the client, but we need to help them to understand that the room must meet both theirs and their cat's needs.

Enticing the cat or kitten to scratching surfaces using food, treats, catnip, or play is always recommended (Figure 7). If the cat has always had a preference for a particular piece of furniture, and the client has allowed it, replacement with a new piece of furniture is not recommended, as it is likely that the cat will commence scratching the new piece of furniture.

Onychectomy has been listed as an medically unnecessary surgery.¹³ The procedure is fraught with short and long term post-operative consequences.

Suffering may go unnoticed, or subsequent pain related behaviors such as house soiling can lead to

relinquishment of the cat.^{5,8} There are a myriad of ways that we can support and encourage clients to live with clawed cats. As veterinary professionals we have the knowledge to discuss the impact of declawing, and positively support the client through the process of training their clawed cat. This support will help to build a long-term veterinary-client-patient relationship, which in turns supports better healthcare for the cat.



Figure 7 Rewards such as food, treats, catnip and/or play are recommended to encourage cats or kittens to utilize appropriate scratching surfaces.

Internet Resources

The Cat Community

<https://catfriendly.com/scratching>

Centre for Disease Control

<https://www.cdc.gov>

Environmental Enrichment

<https://indoorpet.osu.edu/cats>

Cat Healthy

<http://www.cathealthy.ca>

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