

Declawing

One of the controversial issues facing the owner of a cat, kitten or adult, is whether or not to have it declawed.

Ten of 15 years ago declawing was not commonly done. Many pet owners now live in apartments in large cities, and usually find a cat a more suitable companion than a dog. This shift in urban pet ownership from dogs to cats has caused more owners to contemplate the surgery.

Most owners consider declawing because of their cat's uncanny ability to convert everything softer than concrete into abstract art. Cats use their front feet to mark their territory, just as they would in the wild. There are scent glands in their foot pads which leave a cat's own smell, so that there is visual and olfactory testimony as to whose turf this is.

Consequently, it is important to them that the object used is easily seen and admired by anyone who walks into the room. The potential for conflict between friend and feline is great.

Procedure

Like most mammals, cats have three bones in each toe, and the last bone, although very small, has an area at its tip from which the nail grows. There are many different surgical procedures used but, in general, the operation removes that portion of the third bone from which the nail grows. If done correctly, the nail can never regrow. If it does, it is usually simple to correct.

The operation is conducted under a general anaesthetic, and so the procedure itself is painless. The post-operative care varies, but often entails surgical adhesives, sutures (stitches), bandaging the feet, and hospitalization for up to a few days.

In the vast majority of cases, recovery is extremely rapid, and

most cats are walking normally the day after surgery.

Because anaesthetic is used, the best time for the operation is when a cat is young, ideally when it is being neutered, as only one anaesthetic is required. However, even old cats can be declawed with no ill effects.

When your cat goes home after surgery, it is important to keep her quiet. By preventing her from leaping about, there is less chance of complications such as mild seepage if a scab comes loose.

Some vets also recommend using shredded newspaper as litter material for a few days, if your cat will accept it, although some kitty litters on the market today are very fine and soft.

The Considerations

Obviously, a major concern with all cat owners considering declawing is "cruelty." Because of the anaesthesia, we know there is no pain during declawing. If there was, veterinarians would not be willing to perform the operation!

Like any surgical procedure involving anaesthesia, on the day after surgery there is likely to be some feeling of dizziness and mild discomfort, but it is short-lived. For some cat owners, the situation has progressed so far that the only options are removal of the claws or euthanasia – a few hours of sore feet is obviously the better choice.

Another concern some owners have is the host of behavioural changes they've heard their cat will go through after the operation, such as increased house soiling, biting and other forms of aggression.

A study done in Canada recently shows that the vast majority of owners (90 percent) were very happy with their decision, and that the cat's behaviour did not change in any negative way as a result of the surgery. The study also shows that many cats who were previously

aloof, independent or aggressive, became much better adapted socially, and in many cases very friendly!

You should consider whether your cat will be an indoor or outdoor cat. Because cats also use their front feet for defense, declawed cats are at a disadvantage. Most vets recommend that declawed cats remain inside, but there are certainly many declawed cats who go outside and manage to stay out of trouble.

It is only very rarely that the rear claws are removed, as they are the ones used primarily for fighting and climbing to safety. Such cats should not be allowed out under any circumstances.

Alternatives

Most owners are very happy with the long-term benefits of declawing, but it should not necessarily be treated as a matter of course. For many non-aggressive cats, there are alternatives to declawing, and in most cases they are worth trying.

First, and most obvious, is to clip the nails every week or two. If this procedure is begun as a routine when you first bring your kitten home, the chances of needing declawing are greatly reduced. If you are unsure how to clip the nails, ask your veterinarian to show you how. A co-operative cat makes the process go much more smoothly, so it is important to start early in the cat's life.

In addition, offering your cat a scratching post at an early age is important. These are easy enough to make, or you can buy one ready-made from a pet supply shop.

