

K.C. CAT CLINIC

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Scratching Behavior In Your Cat And Why We Don't Declaw

We feel that declawing should only be considered when there is a significant human health risk in the household. The veterinary profession in the United States has performed this procedure so routinely that the public considers it a benign procedure and doesn't understand the true nature of what is involved. It is not a painless nail clipping, it is a true amputation or mutilation of the last bone in the foot. The United States is the only country in the world where this procedure is routine and it is outlawed in many countries. We hope that the information in this handout will help you develop strategies so that you and your cat can coexist without subjecting your cat to amputation of the toes.

The nail grows from tissue on the last bone of the toe. Because of this, a portion or the entire bone must be removed so that the nail will not grow back. The bone that is removed is crescent shaped and rocks to absorb the concussion of the gait. When the bone is removed, the straight bone behind it absorbs the concussion of jumping and running. Sometimes that straight bone is bruised by activity and the foot is uncomfortable after the surgery. Another problem that can occur is that the nerves that are cut with the amputation of the toe become inflamed and produce pain. It's kind of like phantom limb syndrome. There are some cats that will have noticeable discomfort with their feet off and on for several months or more. Cats may have what appears to be a normal walking gait, but will hold one or both paws up at rest. Cats are extremely stoic animals and hide their pain as much as they can. These subtle signs represent a discomfort level that would make a person seek help if it was happening to them. Even when the declawing procedure is performed technically perfect, your cat still runs the risk of developing serious painful consequences.

Cats claw at things to mark territory. It is a very specific type of clawing that takes place on both vertical and horizontal surfaces. It is a rapid back and forth action with the front feet that leaves not only a visual sign from the claw marks, but a scent signal from glands in the toe pads. Even cats that have been declawed will frequently continue to exhibit the behavior on their favorite surfaces.

Cats will use their claws to defend themselves. Interacting with a cat appropriately really helps decrease the likelihood of getting scratched. We've all experienced how uncomfortable it is to have others mess with us when we didn't want them to. It's the same with our animals. Understanding what kind of things that we do in interacting with them that make them scared or threatened enough to strike out can really help. Teach children how to interact appropriately and understand that what we do towards our animals can make them threatened and upset.

We realize that cats can do a lot of damage with their clawing. But you can try some things to train your cat away from certain objects and you can acclimate your cat to allowing regular nail

trimming to minimize damage. Our culture doesn't expect dogs to behave just the way an owner wants without putting some effort into training, the same is true of cats. Consistency and proper training techniques can be effective for this as well as many other things.

Clawing is a normal behavior and a cat needs to do it. They do it to reassure themselves that a territory is safe and their own, but will also do it when stressed. While we want to minimize damage to our things, we need to be sure that they are allowed to scratch somewhere. Cats like surfaces that are coarse and have a low nap; surfaces that mimic tree bark. So if you're trying to make a scratching post, use the burlap backing of a carpet remnant or tightly wrapped marine rope around the core.

Feliway can be a helpful assist to training your cat to a specific scratching location. Use 8-10 pumps of Feliway spray daily on the surfaces that you do not want you cat to scratch. Do it for at least a month. Don't use Feliway on the scratching post or wherever it is OK for your cat to scratch. Once you see your cat start cheek or head rubbing the area, you can discontinue the spray. You'll also need to do some other things to discourage you cat for using specific locations.

Behavior modification techniques can be used to try to make certain surface sticky or the wrong texture and redirect the activity. We have lots of resources for you, so ask if you need additional help. Basically you want to make the object that is being clawed, or the area that the object is in, undesirable. Double-sided carpet tape can be put on the surface of furniture or carpets. There are commercial products available at pet stores. Making a tower out of empty soda cans that will topple safely to startle when the cat goes after a certain area can might make a cat reluctant to approach a location after several spills. This might create an aversion to the location. The trick is to create an aversion that will be in place whether you are present or not. If you are trying to train a cat away from an object like a piece of furniture, try to have a scratching post or pad available close by so that the cat has an acceptable place to perform the scratching behavior near by as being able to do it in a specific location may be offering comfort or reinforcing security.

If you plan to get rid of a piece of furniture that has been used as a scratching location, keep the upholstery. It has the cat's scent on it and may lure the cat to a scratching post if used as a cover. When using behavior modification, give yourself at least a month or so to see if you are making progress. And remember to be persistent and consistent.

If you have questions or need more help with this behavior, please don't hesitate to ask. Many households live with their cat and their cat's claws very successfully.