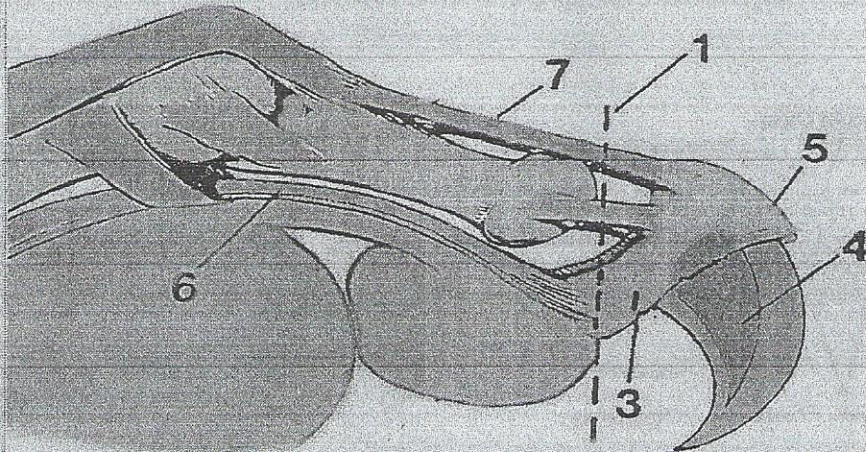


The Facts About Declawing®

(Feline Digital Amputation - "Onychectomy")

What You Really Need To Know

Onychectomy: "Declawing" - Feline Digital Amputation



1. Line of Amputation; 3. Third Phalanx; 4. Ungual Process; 5. Ungual Crest; 6. Flexor Tendon; 7. Dorsal Ligaments - are all severed and amputated in the declawing surgery. Declawing involves 10 separate and painful amputations.

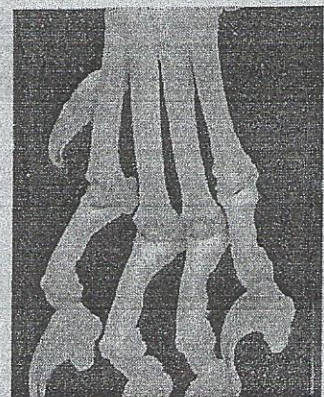
Adapted from: Textbook of Small Animal Surgery 2nd ed, Slatter D; W.B. Saunders Co.

The Cat's Claws

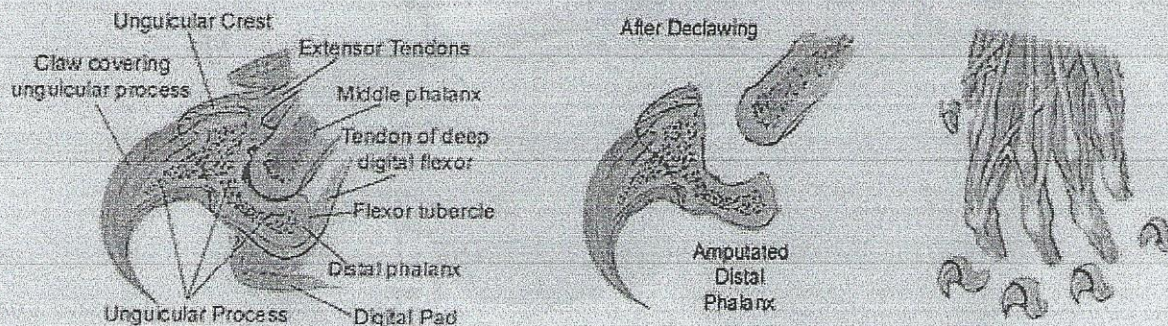
Unlike most mammals who walk on the soles of the paws or feet, cats are digitigrade, which means they walk on their toes. Their back, shoulder, paw and leg joints, muscles, tendons, ligaments and nerves are naturally designed to support and distribute the cat's weight across its toes as it walks, runs and climbs. A cat's claws are used for balance, for exercising, and for stretching the muscles in their legs, back, shoulders, and paws. They stretch these muscles by digging their claws into a surface and pulling back against their own clawhold - similar to isometric exercising for humans. This is the only way a cat can exercise, stretch and tone the muscles of its back and shoulders. The toes help the foot meet the ground at a precise angle to keep the leg, shoulder and back muscles and joints in proper alignment. Removal of the last digits of the toes drastically alters the conformation of their feet and causes the feet to meet the ground at an unnatural angle that can cause back pain similar to that in humans caused by wearing improper shoes.

Understanding Declawing (Onychectomy)

The anatomy of the feline claw must be understood before one can appreciate the severity of declawing. The cat's claw is not a nail as is a human fingernail, it is part of the last bone (distal phalanx) in the cat's toe. The cat's claw arises from the unguicular crest and unguicular process in the distal phalanx of the paw (see above diagram). Most of the germinal cells that produce the claw are situated in the dorsal aspect of the unguicular crest. This region must be removed completely, or regrowth of a vestigial claw and abscessation results. The only way to be sure all of the germinal cells are removed is to amputate the entire distal phalanx at the joint.



Contrary to most people's understanding, declawing consists of amputating not just the claws, but the whole phalanx (up to the joint), including bones, ligaments, and tendons! To remove the claw, the bone, nerve, joint capsule, collateral ligaments, and the extensor and flexor tendons must all be amputated. Thus declawing is not a "simple", single surgery but **10 separate**, painful amputations of the third phalanx up to the last joint of each toe. A graphic comparison in human terms would be the cutting off of a person's finger at the last joint of each finger.

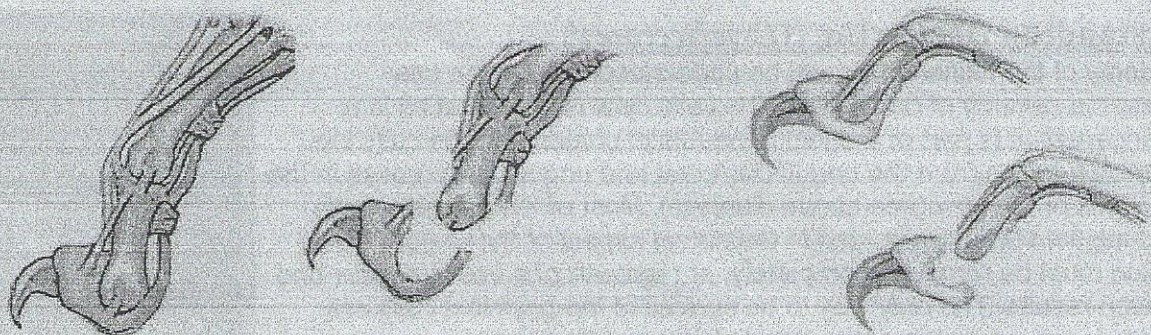


Adapted from: Atlas of Feline Anatomy for Veterinarians; Hudson/Hamilton, W.B. Saunders Company

Many vets and clinic staff deliberately misinform and mislead clients into believing that declawing removes only the claws in the hopes that clients are left with the impression that the procedure is a "minor" surgery comparable to spay/neuter procedures and certainly doesn't involve amputation (partial or complete) of the terminal-toe bone, ligaments and tendons. Some vets rationalize the above description by saying that since the claw and the third phalanx (terminal toe bone) are so firmly connected, they simply use the expression "the claw" to make it simpler for clients to "understand". Other vets are somewhat more honest and state that if they used the word "amputation", most clients would not have the surgery performed! Onychectomy in the clinical definition involves either the partial or total amputation of the terminal bone. That is the only method. What differs from vet to vet is the type of cutting tool used (guillotine-type cutter, scalpel or laser).

Onychectomy (Declawing) Surgery

The below is a clinical description of the declawing surgery taken from a leading veterinary surgical textbook. Contrary to misleading information, declawing is not a "minor" surgery comparable to spaying and neutering procedures, it is 10, separate, painful amputations of the distal phalanx at the joint (*disjointing*).



Adapted from Atlas of Feline Anatomy for Veterinarians; Hudson/Hamilton, W.B. Saunders Co.

"The claw is extended by pushing up under the footpad or by grasping it with Allis tissue forceps. A scalpel blade is used to sharply dissect between the second and third phalanx over the top of the ungual crest. The distal interphalangeal joint is disarticulated (disjointed), and the deep digital flexor tendon is incised (severed). The digital footpad, is not incised. If a nail trimmer is used, the ring of the instrument is placed in the groove between the second phalanx and the ungual crest. The blade is positioned just in front of the footpad. The blade is pushed through the soft tissues over the flexor process. With the ring of the nail trimmer in position behind the ungual crest, the blade is released just slightly so that traction applied to the claw causes the flexor process to slip out and above the blade. At this point, the flexor tendon can be incised and disarticulation of the joint (disjointing) completed. Both techniques effectively remove the entire third phalanx." (Excerpted from: Slatter D; Textbook of Small Animal Surgery 2nd ed vol I, p.352 W.B. Saunders Company Philadelphia.)

Complications

Declawing is not without complication. The rate of complication is relatively high compared with other so-called routine procedures. Complications of this amputation can be excruciating pain, damage to the radial nerve, hemorrhage, bone chips that prevent healing, painful regrowth of deformed claw inside of the paw which is not visible to the eye, and chronic back and joint pain as shoulder, leg and back muscles weaken.

Other complications include postoperative hemorrhage, either immediate or following bandage removal is a fairly frequent occurrence, paw ischemia, lameness due to wound infection or footpad laceration, exposure necrosis of the second phalanx, and abscess associated with retention of portions of the third phalanx. Abscess due to regrowth must be treated by surgical removal of the remnant of the third phalanx and wound debridement. During amputation of the distal phalanx, 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. Infection will occasionally occur when all precautions have been taken.

"Declawing is actually an amputation of the last joint of your cat's "toes". When you envision that, it becomes clear why declawing is not a humane act. It is a painful surgery, with a painful recovery period. And remember that during the time of recuperation from the surgery your cat would still have to use its feet to walk, jump, and scratch in its litter box regardless of the pain it is experiencing."

Christianne Schelling, DVM

"General anesthesia is used for this surgery, which always has a certain degree of risk of disability or death associated with it. Because declawing provides no medical benefits to cats, even slight risk can be considered unacceptable. In addition, the recovery from declawing can be painful and lengthy and may involve postoperative complications such as infections, hemorrhage, and nail regrowth. The latter may subject the cat to additional surgery." The Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights (AVAR)

Two recent studies published in peer-reviewed veterinary journals (*Vet Surg* 1994 Jul-Aug;23(4):274-80) concluded "Fifty percent of the cats had one or more complications immediately after surgery.... 19.8% developed complications after release." Another study (*J Am Vet Med Assoc* 1998 Aug 1;213(3):370-3) comparing the complications of declawing with Tenectomy concluded "Owners should be aware of the high complication rate for both procedures." Many cats also suffer a loss of balance because they can no longer achieve a secure foothold on their amputated stumps.

Vet Surg 1994 Jul-Aug;23(4):274-80

Feline Onychectomy at a Teaching Institution: A Retrospective Study of 163 Cases.

Tobias KS

Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences,

"Objective: To compare short- and long-term complications after Tenectomy of the deep digital flexor tendons or onychectomy.

Animals: 20 cats undergoing Tenectomy and 18 cats undergoing onychectomy.

Procedure: Cats undergoing Tenectomy or onychectomy were monitored for a minimum of 5 months to enable comparison of type and frequency of complications. Type and frequency of complications did not differ between procedures.

Clinical Implications: Owners should be aware of the high complication rate for both procedures."

Psychological & Behavioral Complications

Some cats are so shocked by declawing that their personalities change. Cats who were lively and friendly have become withdrawn and introverted after being declawed. Others, deprived of their primary means of defense, become nervous, fearful, and/or aggressive, often resorting to their only remaining means of defense, their teeth. In some cases, when declawed cats use the litterbox after surgery, their feet are so tender they associate their new pain with the box...permanently, resulting in a life-long aversion to using the litter box. Other declawed cats that can no longer mark with their claws, they mark with urine instead resulting in inappropriate elimination problems, which in many cases, results in relinquishment of the cats to shelters and ultimately euthanasia. Many of the cats surrendered to shelters are surrendered because of behavioral problems which developed **after** the cats were declawed.

Risk factors for relinquishment of cats to an animal shelter:

- *"Among 218 cats relinquished to a shelter, more (52.4%) declawed cats than non-declawed cats (29.1%) were reported by owners to have inappropriate elimination problems."*

Source: World Small Animal Veterinary Association - 2001

The incidence of behavior problems following onychectomy in cats; two months to five years (median 11.5 months) after surgery:

- *"(33%) developed at least one behavior problem.*
- *"(17.9%) had an increase in biting habits or intensity."*
- *"(15.4%) would not use the litter box"*

Source: World Small Animal Veterinary Association - 2001

Many declawed cats become so traumatized by this painful mutilation that they end up spending their maladjusted lives perched on top of doors and refrigerators, out of reach of real and imaginary predators against whom they no longer have any adequate defense.

A cat relies on its claws as its primary means of defense. Removing the claws makes a cat feel defenseless. The constant state of stress caused by a feeling of defenselessness may make some declawed cats more prone to disease. Stress leads to a myriad of physical and psychological disorders including suppression of the immune system, cystitis and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)..

"The consequences of declawing are often pathetic. Changes in behavior can occur. A declawed cat frequently resorts to biting when confronted with even minor threats. Biting becomes an overcompensation for the insecurity of having no claws. Bungled surgery can result in the regrowth of deformed claws or in an infection leading to gangrene. Balance is affected by the inability to grasp with their claws. Chronic physical ailments such as cystitis or skin disorders can be manifestations of a declawed cat's frustration and stress" David E. Hammett, DVM

Moral, Ethical and Humane Considerations

The veterinary justification for declawing is that the owner may otherwise dispose of the cat, perhaps