

ONYCHECTOMY

Potter League For Animals Position on Onychectomy:

Our mission at the Potter League for Animals is to educate our community about the nature and extent of this surgery, its possible complications, and especially about the alternatives to curb the unwanted behavior. Our position is that onychectomy is never acceptable unless it is the only alternative to euthanasia after all other alternatives have been used and have proven unsuccessful.

I. What is it?

Onychectomy is the medical term for the procedure involved in declawing a cat. This surgery is almost always an elective procedure (not medically necessary) that requires the amputation of the last digital bone on each front toe in the cat's paw to which the claw is attached. This amputation is normally performed only on the front paws as injury to humans/other pets and damages due to scratching occur less commonly with the rear paws.

There are three common methods used to declaw a cat:

- Blade declawing is the most common and most radical method where an instrument with a sliding blade cuts a straight line through the joint between the entire claw growth and the rest of the cat's paw.
- Laser declawing uses a laser to remove the third bone of the cat's claw. This procedure is usually more expensive than blade declawing but results in less bleeding as well as less pain and a shorter recovery time.
- Cosmetic declawing involves a procedure where a tiny curved blade dissects out the claw and the tiny piece of bone to which the claw is affixed. The soft tissue and pad remain intact, resulting a shorter recovery time.

II. Why do it?

Cats have an instinctive need to scratch surfaces to remove excess claw material, and to keep nails clean and in good shape. Cats also scratch surfaces to mark their territory visually and with their scent, and to stretch their muscles. Cats are typically declawed for the benefit of the owner to alleviate damage to property, or injury to humans/other pets. Rarely, a cat may be declawed for medical reasons such as paronychia or neoplasia. Paronychia is a bacteria or fungal infection at the boundary between claws and skin. Neoplasia is defined as abnormal tissue growth around the claw.

In the USA, most animal welfare organizations estimate that between 20 and 25% of domestic cats are declawed.

III. Pros

- Minimizes risk of injury to immunocompromised individuals or pets in the household.
- Prevents excessive/inappropriate scratching of property that continues in spite of conscientious attention to behavior modification and other alternatives noted below.
- Numerous studies have shown that there is no correlation between declawing and undesirable behavior or personality changes.
- The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) policy on declawing cats states that scientific data indicates that cats that have destructive scratching behavior are more likely to be euthanized or relinquished, released or abandoned.
- The ASPCA is in agreement policy that this procedure should be available if it is the only alternative to euthanasia.

IV. Cons

- Regardless of the method used, veterinary professionals agree that the procedure causes a significant level of pain. Pain in cats is difficult to gauge because cats are stoic by nature and pain responses are subtle.
- Onychectomy is an elective surgical procedure subject to all of the usual surgical complications such as adverse reaction to anesthesia, bleeding and infection with no demonstrable benefit to the cat.
- Fewer than half of all veterinary schools in the USA include a mandatory lecture or laboratory to teach this surgery. This lack of formal training in onychectomy could lead to inferior surgical technique and increase the likelihood of complications.
- Declawing a cat removes its primary method of defending itself. Declawed cats must remain indoors.

V. Alternatives to onychectomy

- Provide suitable tools for normal scratching behaviors such as scratching posts/pads, cardboard boxes and lumber or logs. Cats prefer wood, sisal rope, carpet, cardboard and rough fabrics. Also, cover the object you do not want scratched with material that is aversive to the cat like foil, plastic or double sided tape.
- Regularly trim the cat's nails every one to two weeks.
- Consider use of temporary synthetic nail caps that are glued over nails to prevent injury to humans/other pets or household items. These caps

usually need to be replaced every 4-6 weeks as they fall off with growth. These caps are not recommended for outdoor cats.

- Consider using synthetic facial pheromone sprays and/or diffusers such as Feliway (Ceva) to help relieve anxiety or stress that may be related to scratching behavior.

VI. Conclusion.

Onychectomy is an ethically controversial procedure. It is currently prohibited in the European Union, including the United Kingdom, and Australia, Brazil, Israel and some other countries. Eight cities in California, including Los Angeles, San Francisco and Beverly Hills, have also banned the procedure. However, legally banning the procedure may present problems where onychectomy is the only alternative to euthanasia. Crafting legislation with this exception to the ban is very difficult to enforce. Both the ASPCA and the AVMA strongly discourage the practice in their most recent policy statements and opine that it should only be used as an alternative to euthanasia.

References:

1. American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) Policy and Position Statements, Position Statement on Declawing Cats, April 1, 2003
2. American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA) Policy Statement on Declawing of Domestic Cats, May 6, 2016, July 31, 2018
3. The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) Position Statement on Declawing Cats, September 6, 2019