

# Alternatives to Declawing

## What Is Declawing

Declawing is a procedure performed on cats usually to prevent them from scratching. Despite the name, the procedure is much more involved than simply removing a cat's claws. Declawing involves the complete removal of the last bone in each toe (without removing this bone the claws would simply grow back if removed). In people this would equate to removing down to the first knuckle of each finger. The surgery has fallen out of favor and is even illegal in many countries and parts of the US, citing animal cruelty. Studies show that declawing can lead to chronic pain and behavior problems in cats. Declawing is not recommended by our doctors at Main Street Vet. Below you will find some alternatives that can help decrease any negative scratching behaviors in cats.

## Why do Cats Scratch?

While most people assume that cats scratch to sharpen their nails there are several other reasons as well for scratching behaviors that are important to understand when trying to redirect scratching.

- Claiming territory – cats will leave their scent behind when scratching as a calling card to claim their territory. For this reason, cats often choose a particular favorite location (such as a living room couch) and return to it often to scratch.
- Boredom and stretching – cats love to stretch and, unfortunately, scratching can often go along with how cats do this. Cats can also become bored at times and scratching is an easy way to add some variety to their routines.
- Habit and Instinct – cats are born with an innate desire to scratch. Once they find a spot, they like to return again and again until it can become habit.

## Alternatives to Declawing

While scratching is a natural and instinctual behavior in cats there are some things that you can do to decrease and prevent your cat from scratching in places you don't want them to. Below are 7 tips for preventing negative scratching behavior.

### 1. Offer an Alternative:

#### Location is Key:

Offer appropriate scratching locations. While this might seem obvious, the tricky part to offering an appropriate scratch location is finding what works for both you AND your cat. As we've already established, cats like to mark their territory which usually means they want to scratch in the heart of the home. Set up a scratch location in the living space that your cat prefers to spend time in.

#### Style:

Cats often have a preferred scratching style, either horizontal or vertical. If your cat likes the

back of a sofa or trim of a door, they are likely a vertical scratcher. On the other hand, if your cat likes to scratch the living room rug, they will likely prefer horizontal options. It is usually best to offer both options, but some cats do stick to only one style over the other so note your cats' preferences. Be sure the scratch surface allows your cat plenty of space to stretch out as they scratch.

### **Material**

There are several options when it comes to materials for cats to scratch on. Studies have found that sisal rope is favored most by cats, but cats will also sometimes like carpet or cardboard. It is best, if possible, to offer several options to your cat so that they can choose the material they prefer.

## **2. Use Deterrents**

If you find that your cat starts scratching inappropriate spots in your home, you can use deterrents to discourage the behavior. While some deterrents aren't the most attractive long-term, they can be very effective to redirecting your cat in the short term while you work on re-training them to use an appropriate scratch spot.

### **Furniture Covers**

Furniture covers can be used to physically block furniture that your cat has decided to scratch on. These covers are usually made of plastic and physically prevent your cat from getting to the fabric to scratch. These covers often have a sticky side that can be adhered to sections of furniture. Cats soon learn that their favorite location is no longer accessible.

### **Tape and Spikey Mats**

Using double sided tape can be a good option to prevent scratching behavior as it is relatively easy and inexpensive to use. Simply adhere double sided tape to any location your cat has started scratching. Your cat will quickly learn that they do not enjoy the feeling of tape and move on. Another option is plastic, non-painful, spike mats which can be purchased to cover a carpeted area or go under or in front of furniture. Cats will not walk on the mat and be forced to find a new location to scratch.

## **3. Make Appropriate Scratch Spots Appealing**

One way you can encourage your cat to use your desired scratch spot is to make it more appealing to them. Many cats enjoy catnip and sprinkling a small amount on and near their appropriate scratching location can encourage them to enjoy the spot. You can also purchase cat pheromones to encourage your cat to like their scratching location. Pheromones come in the form of sprays or wipes and can mimic the hormones that mother cats emit to calm their kittens. Pheromones can help your cat to feel calm and relaxed and encourage them to enjoy the space.

## **4. Positive Reinforcements**

Cats can learn that using an appropriate scratch location gets them rewarded, which will encourage them to use the space more often. Rewards can come in the forms of attention, treats, a favorite toy, whatever your cat enjoys most. Through repetition your cat can learn that

appropriate scratching leads to rewards and creates a positive association.

## **5. Keep Nails Trimmed**

One way you can ensure that your cat doesn't do as much damage when they scratch is by keeping their nails trimmed. Regular nail trims go a long way to protecting furniture in your home as your cat will not be able to do nearly as much damage with short nails as they would with long ones. You can learn to trim your cats' nails at home if you wish, or you can bring them for a visit with us or a groomer for regular trims. Nails tend to grow fast so you will want to trim them every few weeks if you are trying to protect furniture.

## **6. Nail Caps**

Nail caps are a unique option to preventing scratching in cats and involve small, colorful, plastic nail covers being fitted onto each of your cats' nails. These covers remain in place for about a month and are an excellent way to prevent damage from scratching. It can sometimes take cats a couple of days to adjust to the caps but after they have gotten used to them, they are able to enjoy all their normal cat behaviors without doing any damage with their nails.

## **7. Environmental Enrichment**

One of the best things you can do for your cat is provide them with regular environmental enrichment. Not only can this help prevent destructive scratching behaviors, but it can also help prevent other negative behaviors and is great for the mental health of your cat. Cats greatly benefit from a stimulating environment that mimics what they would experience in the wild. Toys that move and can be "hunted" and food and treat dispensing toys are two examples of ways you can help your cat receive the mental stimulation they crave.

## **Putting it all Together**

Cats can sometimes use their nails in ways that are not appreciated inside a home, but declawing is not the only solution available. Whether it be through environmental enrichment, adding or modifying scratching options, or using nail caps there are many possible solutions to this problem that are not harmful or painful for your cat. Using the above tips can go a long way to reduce or eliminate unwanted scratching. If you have concerns about your cats scratching behaviors, please reach out to the staff at Main Street Vet so that we can help you find the solution that works best for you and your cat.