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Declawing Cats

Some people find the idea of declawing a cat unacceptable. Entire countries have outlawed the procedure and some communities in the United States have done the same. I have found that such disdain for declawing usually is the result of either lack of information concerning how the procedure should be done or incorrect or blatantly false information found on the internet. As I often tell people, Dr. Google is a very, very bad Doctor.

For the record, I have absolutely no ethical problem declawing cats. If the procedure is done properly and with appropriate pain control it is generally well tolerated and the patient experiences some discomfort for a few weeks but behaves normally and has no long term side effects. Most people are quite surprised at how well a cat does after declawing. The horror stories about cats being unable to walk properly ever again or not using the litter box are simply problems that we do not see in our patients. My philosophy is quite simple - if a cat is going to live safely indoors for 15 to 20 years then that cat is not going to shred my furniture or belongings. And a scratching post generally does little to prevent that from happening.

I will now explain how the procedure is done properly. In our hospital it begins with the patient receiving pain medication before the surgery. This prepares any nerves that are going to be involved allowing them to already be sensitized to pain medication before any surgery is performed. The procedure itself involves using a scalpel to surgically remove the last bone and associated claw on each toe. Very little soft tissue is involved. What is removed looks like a small bone with a claw attached. Next, each site receives a drop or two of a local anesthetic agent that will provide additional pain relief for many hours. Then each toe is sutured and the entire foot is bandaged. After the surgery the patient receives an injection of a pain medication. The patient usually wakes up and acts normal and is eating and drinking the next day without difficulty. The patient has their bandages removed the next day and stays one more night in the hospital before going home with three weeks of oral pain medication.

As mentioned, we rarely have complications from declaw surgery. The biggest complication we see is the occasional cat that will pull their sutures so much they remove a stitch prematurely and the site gets infected. That happens about once every couple of years. On very rare occasions there may be a patient that endures some temporary odd nerve damage from the tourniquet that is applied during the surgery. This problem resolves itself within a few days.

Declawing a cat is a safe and effective procedure that allows a cat to remain indoors without fear of the cat destroying possessions with their claws. If done properly there are no long term side effects and patients go back to normal function quite rapidly. I would much rather a cat be declawed and live indoors than be placed outside where a host of bad outcomes can befall them.