

GUIDING CLIENTS ON Living with a Clawed Cat



Most clients are not aware that declawing (onychectomy) is a surgical amputation and that scratching is a normal feline behavior. Veterinary practices have a responsibility to counsel their clients, emphasizing the alternatives to declawing and teaching them how to live in harmony with their clawed cat.

Why Do Cats Have Claws?

Share with your clients that cats' claws are anatomically unique and serve several functions. The forelimb claws of the cat are uniquely retractable and allow them to expose or retract their nails as needed.

Main uses for cats' claws:

- A cat may expose their claws to hunt and use them to grasp and capture their prey.
- During times of conflict with other cats or other animals, the cat may need to use its claws to defend itself.
- Mark territory both visually (scratching inanimate objects) and chemically (via pheromones).

Why Do Cats Scratch Inanimate Objects?

Emphasize that scratching is a natural, normal, and necessary behavior for cats. They do not scratch with the intention of upsetting their caregiver or damaging furniture. It is a form of communication and often occurs during times of stress and anxiety.

Cats scratch for three main reasons:

- To renew the nail by dislodging the old nail growth and exposing a new, sharper nail underneath.
- To mark their territory visually and with scent (pheromones) to other cats and animals.
- To stretch out their limbs.

Increased scratching and marking may occur in times of stress and anxiety, including when environmental resources are threatened or restricted. It is critical to identify the cause of the stress or anxiety so you can address the issue and reduce the unwanted scratching behavior. A veterinary behaviorist may be needed to help resolve the problem.

Best Practices for Living with a Clawed Cat

Share these preventive strategies with your clients.

Tips for living with a cat with nails:

- Trim cat's nails regularly (provide a demonstration for clients). Temporary synthetic nail caps may be an option for some cats.
- Provide appropriate resources for each cat:
 - Litter boxes
 - Sleeping and resting areas
 - Food bowls
 - Water bowls
 - Scratching surfaces
 - Toys for play
- Provide appropriate environmental enrichment in the home to include interactive play, perches and scratch posts that allow vertical accessibility, and human attention if desired.
- Address any inter-cat related issues that may be causing fear or anxiety. Inter-cat conflict is common and a cause of undesirable scratching. However, as signs are subtle, owners may not recognize the conflict until behavior problems occur. To aid in conflict prevention, ensure all resources are ample and located in multiple locations throughout the house to prevent competition for these resources in multiple cat households.
- Teach everyone in the household that cats should be treated with respect. No one should be allowed to play rough with a cat or handle them in a manner that causes fear, stress, or pain.
- Do not use your fingers or toes, or the wiggling of hands or feet as a toy for play. This form of play can lead to biting or scratching. Instead, play can be stimulated with the use of interactive toys that mimic prey, such as a toy mouse that is pulled across a floor or feathers on a wand that is waved through the air.



GUIDING CLIENTS ON Living with a Clawed Cat continued

What Makes an Ideal Scratching Surface?



It is best to advise your clients to offer their cat an assortment of options, in a wide variety of locations because the ideal scratching surface is different for each cat.

Here are some important features you should counsel your clients to keep in mind:

- **Size and Shape** - Most cats like to scratch vertically. They will need a sturdy post that is taller than their body length to fully stretch and give a good scratch.

If the cat is scratching carpet, recommend a horizontal scratcher.

- **Texture** - The texture of the scratching post is also important. Many cats prefer sisal rope; others prefer corrugated cardboard, carpet, or wood on the scratching surface.
- It is important to experiment with a variety of textures and types of scratchers to determine which is preferred by each cat.

Train Cats to Scratch Appropriately

Share these important tips with your clients:

- **Location is critical.**
 - Cats often stretch or scratch when they wake up, so recommend placing a scratcher near the cat's sleeping area.
 - Place a scratching post or pad near where the cat is currently scratching that is undesirable (e.g. in front of a couch leg, or door to the outside) as the changes in scent profile can result in cats re-marking that area.
 - If the cat scratches somewhere other than the scratching post or pad, provide instructions to pick them up, take them to the scratcher, and then provide a reward.
- **Provide rewards and positive reinforcement.**
 - Remind your clients that cats learn best through positive reinforcement.



- As they are redirecting their cat to use the new scratching post or pad, emphasize giving the reward immediately (within 3 seconds) to reinforce the positive behavior.
- It is important to remember they will need to find a reward their cat likes (i.e. treats, catnip, interactive play, and petting, or grooming).

Troubleshooting Inappropriate Scratching

Here are some common issues that clients may experience and advice you can share:

- **Cat is scratching an undesirable surface.**
 - If the surface is near a window or door where the cat can see and/or smell another cat (or other smells), discourage or remove the unwanted cats from the yard, block window views, and use feline facial pheromones.
- **Frequency of scratching is increasing.**
 - Try to identify and address what may be causing the cat stress, anxiety, or frustration.
 - If the cat is stressed or anxious due to changes in the household (people, furniture, smells, etc.), and other options have not helped, discuss appropriate treatment to resolve distress or anxiety.
 - Conduct a physical examination to identify pain, and treat if appropriate.
 - Discuss and resolve inter-cat issues immediately. Ensure that each cat has access to a complete set of resources, which are separated so that cats have free access without being challenged or blocked by other cats or perceived threats.
 - Review their schedules and recommend consistent timing for feeding, care, petting (if favorable to the cat), and play.
 - Explain the importance of cleaning the litter boxes regularly and ensure they are placed in multiple locations where one cat cannot block the path of the other (e.g. not in a hallway or near steps).

For more detailed information, access these resources:

Catfriendly.com/scratching (Client Resource)

Catvets.com/brochures (Download Alternatives to Declawing Brochure)

Catvets.com/scratching (Scratching Education)

