

# what happens when you declaw the paw

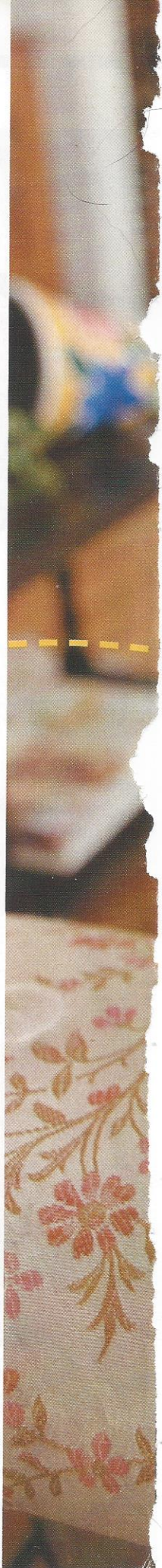
BY SANDRA L. TONEY

**Fifteen years ago,** Paul Warner of Wichita, Kansas, moved into his first home and adopted two cats, which he “automatically” had altered and declawed. Back then, there wasn’t a lot of public knowledge about the declawing procedure.

“I’ll never forget the pain they went through trying to walk on their bandaged paws,” he remembered, “and I vowed I would never make another cat go through such agony again.” Many years later, he has kept his promise to felines — he has never had any of his other cats declawed. Today, Canna and Jasmine have full run of his household, claws and all.

Declawing is highly controversial among cat lovers. Just as there are cat owners like Warner, who detest this procedure, there are other devoted cat owners who support declawing — like Lafayette, Indiana, resident Dianne Kearns, who loves her two furry friends, Jordy and Jinx, more than anything, but has had them both declawed.

“I’ve never regretted my decision,” Kearns said, adding that it’s mainly due to her desire to have nice furnishings without the fear of everything being shredded by kitty claws. “My cats came through the surgery beautifully. They were a bit tenderfooted for a few days, but the veterinarian did a wonderful job, and they were completely back to normal in a short time.”



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—DR. SUSAN LITTLE

### **All those in favor...**

Protecting home furnishings is probably the most “accepted” reason people have their cats declawed.

“Sometimes clients will call me because their cat is scratching and biting or damaging some aspects of the furniture,” said animal behaviorist Dr. John Wright, “and they ask about declawing as an option for them. If they can't take care of the scratching or destruction problem, they are going to have to get rid of the cat. So sometimes, for some owners — not that it makes it right — declawing is an option that will actually keep the cat alive . . . and living in the household as a companion animal.”

Wright also said several studies conducted on declawed cats have shown no evidence of behavioral problems caused by this procedure, identified medically as an **onychectomy**.

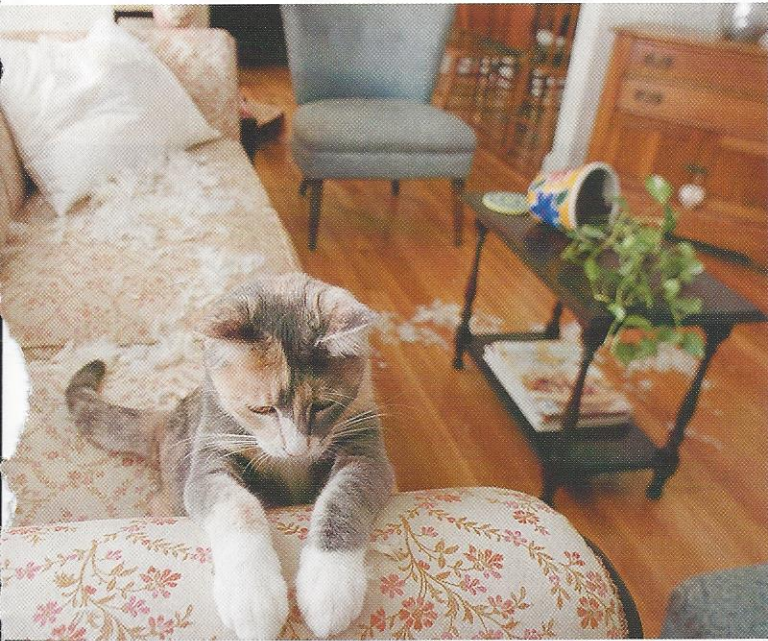
Of course, there also are more crucial reasons to have kitty declawed. As Dr. Susan Little, owner and operator of two feline-only veterinary clinics in Ottawa, Canada, noted, “I sometimes have clients ask me to do the surgery because someone in their home is immunosuppressed and can't take the risk of a cat scratch. This can happen with HIV/AIDS, but

also with cancer, chemotherapy, diabetes and some other diseases. Sometimes, declawing allows an ill person to keep a pet."

## All those against...

In some countries, such as Australia, declawing a feline is illegal because it's considered an act of cruelty. No such law exists in the United States or Canada, but many major animal welfare and cat associations have taken a stand against felines being declawed. In fact, the Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA), the world's largest registry for purebred cats, released an official statement in 1996 saying that CFA "disapproves" of the procedure. Also, entering a cat in a CFA cat show (either in the pedigree or household category) means that kitty must have a full set of nails.

"I have always agreed with the position taken by CFA on the issue of declawed cats," said Will Thompson, longtime All Breed



CFA judge and author of numerous books. "It is tantamount to removing a person's fingernails and/or toenails — not a very desirable thing to have done.

"However, in the case of the cat, the issue is not only one of mutilation, but also one of eliminating one of the cat's vital protective tools," Thompson said. "The cat's claws enable the animal to climb trees quickly to escape from life-threatening situations such as being cornered by a large and ferocious dog whose only aim is to eliminate the cat. Rapid climbing of a tree is one of the cat's major self-protective weapons."

Remember, if there is even the slightest chance a cat could get outside, owners should not consider having kitty declawed, sources advise.

## Coming to a compromise

Owners who don't want their cats to scratch them or their furniture, can first try alternative methods to the declawing procedure.

"Nail caps, like Soft Paws, were initially quite well-received," Little said, "but many owners turned off them when they realized that the cost over the lifetime of the pet was very high and that they are endlessly annoying to replace when the claws grow out every

few weeks, or when one falls off, etc. We no longer do any of them."

Of course, every owner has different results and can try caps or nail sheaths that slip on over kitty's nails, but cats have to be given time to adjust to the feel of them.

Perhaps the best alternative to the invasive surgery is training.

"Declawing is not necessary if one is able and willing to train one's cat . . . but that's a big if," said Dr. Carin Smith, author of the book, *101 Training Tips for Cats*. "Unfortunately, the real world is one in which people are not able and willing to do so, for a variety of reasons.

"Because of that unfortunate fact, the fact remains that people do have animals put to sleep or sent to the shelter, or just put out on the street because of clawing problems," added Smith, who practices veterinary medicine in Leavenworth, Washington. "If we have to choose between one of those choices and declawing, then declawing may be a better choice. Of course, the ideal situation is one in which that was not a choice. Human nature being what it is, that choice exists."

## Making the Decision

So, how do owners know what's right for their cats?

"It really depends on the person," said Wright, author of *Is Your Cat Crazy?* "There are people who are very sensitive to their cat's needs in terms of not having them go through that while others say, 'We want a cat and we love our cat, but we also have a 1-year-old and we're just scared to death that the cat is going to jump on him, get scared and then all of a sudden scratch him.' So, it is one of those things that each family has to decide for itself the risks associated in keeping them [kitty's claws] and taking them off." ■ See sources on page 62.

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**B**elieve it or not, the American view on the issue of declawing cats is not all that common in other countries of the world. In the United States, pet owners have the right to decide whether or not they want to have their cat declawed, but in many other nations of the world, this act is either illegal or considered an act of animal cruelty.

The following list contains some of the countries which either consider the act of declawing inhumane or against the law, and the procedure is strongly discouraged except under extreme circumstances:

Australia  
Austria  
Brazil  
Denmark  
Finland  
Germany  
Netherlands  
New Zealand  
Northern Ireland  
Norway  
Poland  
Sweden  
Switzerland  
United Kingdom

Each cat registry has different guidelines for their show cats; check with each individual association to find out their beliefs regarding the issue of declawing. Cat registries such as The International Cat Association (TICA) and the American Cat Fanciers' Association (ACFA) allow felines who've been declawed to compete in their shows. However, in 1996, the Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA) Board of Directors unanimously approved a guidance statement saying that the CFA "disapproves of declawing and tendonectomy surgery."

Finally, longtime, respected veterinarian, Dr. Louis J. Camuti was the first veterinarian in the United States to devote his entire practice to cats. For more than 60 years, Camuti made house calls for his feline patients. At a time when declawing a feline was considered "standard" practice, this renowned doctor stated, "I wouldn't declaw a cat if you paid me \$1,000 per nail!"