

This Routine Procedure Could Soon Become a Criminal Animal Cruelty Offense

It's the first time this has come up statewide in the US. What's already law in Australia and several European countries, and even some California cities, could soon become law across these other two US states. If it passes, will it lead to more euthanasia of healthy pets?

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A group of veterinarians in New York is lobbying to ban declawing of cats statewide
- New Jersey is also considering legislation to outlaw declawing, and several large California cities have already passed laws banning the practice
- Declawing is not a nail trim, it's an unnecessary and cruel amputation, and can result in behaviors even less desirable than clawing
- To discourage destructive clawing, it's important to provide kitty with an appealing alternative scratching surface
- It's also important to discourage illegal scratching with effective deterrents, and to regularly clip your cat's nails

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 19, 2016.

A group of veterinarians in New York is lobbying for a statewide ban on the declawing of cats. According to the Associated Press (AP), the veterinarians believe "... the declawing procedure, which involves cutting through bone, tendon and nerves to amputate the first segment of a cat's toes, is unnecessary and cruel."

Australia and several European countries, including Britain, have outlawed the procedure. In the U.S., declawing is illegal in Los Angeles and other California cities, including San Francisco, Burbank, Santa Monica, Berkeley, Beverly Hills and Culver City.

If the NY anti-declawing group is successful, it would make New York the first state in the country to ban the procedure. However, there are veterinarians on the other side of the debate arguing against the legislative proposal to outlaw the procedure.

In fact, the New York State Veterinary Medical Society (NYSVMS) is against the proposed ban. The Society's position is declawing "... can often save cats with destructive scratching behavior from being euthanized," and therefore, the decision should be left to cat owners and veterinarians rather than lawmakers:

"Veterinarians take the issue of onychectomy (declawing) very seriously because it is considered a surgical procedure. They strive to educate pet owners of all available alternatives prior to discussing declawing."

The NYSVMS strongly encourages client education prior to consideration of declawing, and believes the decision should be made by the owners in consultation with their veterinarian.”¹

Advocates of the legislation believe other options, including nail clipping, nail caps, and scratching posts, should be used in lieu of declawing to deal with destructive clawing.

The vets lobbying for the ban point out that declawing a cat often leads to even less desirable behaviors, including **litterbox aversion** and biting, which are frequently cited as reasons cats are relinquished to shelters.

“In most cases, declawing is performed as a convenience to the owner,” says Linda Rosenthal, a sponsor of the bill. “I’ve heard so many times: ‘I have expensive furniture! I have nice drapes!’ If your standard is ‘I need pristine furniture,’ don’t get a cat.”

New Jersey Could Beat New York to the Punch

South New Jersey Assemblyman Troy Singleton has sponsored legislation in his state that would make onychectomy a criminal animal cruelty offense.²

As proposed in Assembly Bill A3899, veterinarians that perform declaws, as well as the pet owners who ask for them, could be fined up to \$1,000 or spend six months in jail. Lawbreakers would also be dealt a civil penalty of \$500 to \$2,000.³

In certain very rare instances there is a medical reason for declawing, and in those cases the procedure would not violate the proposed law.

According to Katie Lisnik, director of Cat Protection and Policy for the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), there are an estimated 85 million family cats in the U.S., and between 19% and 46% are declawed.

“Vets argue they do it as a last resort,” says Lisnik. “Those numbers would beg to differ.”

To Your Cat, Scratching Is as Automatic as Breathing

Your feline companion scratches and claws around the house for lots of good reasons, none of which have to do with a desire to destroy your expensive belongings!

Using their claws is a perfectly natural feline behavior and provides a number of positive benefits to the animal. Among them:

- It helps cats stretch and tone their shoulders and legs
- It sheds the older layers of nails and keeps the claws clean and smooth
- Kitties use clawing to mark their territory both visually and with the scent of their paw pads
- It reduces stress and just plain feels good!

It's important to understand why your kitty scratches so you can direct her energies toward less destructive use of those sharp little claws. The following are some tips and tricks to help your feline family member learn proper clawing etiquette.

Step No. 1 — Provide Kitty with Her Own Approved Scratching Surface

Observe your cat's scratching behavior to determine what kind of scratcher(s) might appeal to her. Some kitties scratch horizontally. Some reach high overhead vertically for a good backstretch. Some lie on their backs and scratch a surface above them.

Also, observe what types of surface your cat prefers to scratch. Some cats go for soft fabric while others like wood flooring. If possible, buy or make cat scratchers that will satisfy both your kitty's preferred scratching position and surface.

When you have your scratching surfaces ready to go, they need to be placed where they'll be used. Remember that clawing is in part a marking behavior for your cat, so it's likely she's returning to the same place to scratch.

It's doubtful your cat scratchers compliment the décor of your home, but unfortunately, they need to be located as close to that sofa corner or section of carpet as possible in order to entice kitty. You can also try locating one in front of the window she looks out of, her feeding area or her litterbox.

Sticking the scratchers in out-of-the-way spots your cat doesn't frequent is unlikely to solve the problem. If you have more than one kitty, it's also a good idea to have more than one scratcher, since many cats don't like to share their scratching territory.

Encourage your cat to explore the scratcher using a lure like a feather toy or a toy with some catnip rubbed on it. Offer praise and treats each time she uses the post and especially when she digs her claws into it. Pet her while she's using the post, and give her any other kinds of positive reinforcement she responds to. The idea is to make it an appealing experience each time she uses the new scratching surface.

Step No. 2 — Discourage Illegal Scratching

While you're training your cat to use appropriate scratching surfaces, you'll also need to make any illegal surfaces he's fond of as unattractive as possible to him.

Depending on what surfaces you want to protect, consider using scratching deterrents such as aluminum foil, double-sided tape, plastic sheeting, plastic carpet runners, car or chair mats with the spiky sides up, and/or inflated balloons. There are also herbal spray deterrents available that are designed to replace your pet's paw pad scent markers on furniture, or other surfaces with an odor that will discourage him from returning to that spot.

Step No. 3 — Clip or Cover Your Cat's Claws

Clipping the tips of your cat's front claws once or twice a month will make them less destructive when she scratches. It's best to get your cat used to having her paws handled while she's still a kitten, but no matter your cat's age, start the process by simply stroking your kitty's paws regularly to desensitize her. Incorporate paw massages into your daily routine to keep your cat feeling comfortable about nail trims.

Purchase a set of claw trimmers from your veterinarian or a pet supply store, or just use a regular sharp (human) nail clipper. Do the following:

- With your cat in a calm, relaxed mood, take one of her paws and gently press a toe pad to extend the claw. You'll see the nail on the end (clear or white) attached to pink tissue called the quick (which contains the nail's blood supply). Cutting into the quick will cause pain and bleeding, so you want to avoid this area of the claw.
- Holding the clipper in a vertical position, cut each nail about halfway between the sharp tip and the point where the quick begins. Avoid cutting at a right angle across the nail, as this may cause splitting.
- If you do happen to cut into the quick, don't panic. Just focus on soothing and reassuring your kitty. Any bleeding should stop on its own very quickly with a little pressure or you can also use a styptic powder like Kwik Stop.
- If your cat is fearful, impatient or uncooperative, try trimming just a nail or two each time. You'll get to them all eventually.

If you want to take the trimming one step further, there's a product available called Soft Paws. These are nail caps you can glue over your kitty's trimmed tips, eliminating the damage she can do when she scratches. Drawbacks are they are tricky to apply, have a tendency to fall off or be pulled off by your kitty, and need to be replaced frequently.

Sources and References

[Portland Press Herald May 17, 2016](#)

¹ [NYSVMS Declaw Position Statement](#)

² [NJ.com, June 20, 2016](#)

³ [Assembly, No. 3899, State of New Jersey, 217th Legislature \(Archived\)](#)
