

'WE CONSIDER DECLAWING AS A LAST-DITCH EFFORT'

Declawing is a controversial surgical procedure that removes a cat's claws and the last joint of his toes. It's frequently performed when a cat is neutered; however, both the American Veterinary Medical Association and American Animal Hospital Association oppose the practice, saying that it is not medically necessary in most cases.

The surgery should be considered only after attempts have been made to prevent the cat from using claws destructively or when clawing presents serious health risks to geriatric, diabetic or immunocompromised owners, the AVMA says.

Cats use scratching to mark their territory both visually and with scent, to stretch themselves and to condition their claws, the AVMA says, adding that the surgery, called an onychectomy, has risks, including anesthetic complications, hemorrhage, infection and pain.

"I am against routine declawing that happens when a cat gets altered," says animal behaviorist Katherine H. Houpt, VMD, Ph.D., at Cornell. "More people declaw cats because they are getting scratched, not the fur-

niture. That's play aggression. You can teach them to play with appropriate things or blow whistles when the cat is stalking you, so you don't have to amputate his toes. However, by the time one member of a couple gets to 'He goes or I go,' in that case I would put the cat through declawing rather than have the cat surrendered to a shelter and euthanized. Declawing is a whole lot better than death."

Bruce G. Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., Associate Director for Education and Outreach at the Feline Health Center at Cornell, concurs. "Declawing is a pretty dramatic measure. We like to consider the concept of declawing as a last-ditch effort. It can be associated with discomfort and surgical risks. If you've tried all of the non-surgical alternatives without success, and scratching will force you to give up your cat to a shelter, it's better to have him declawed."

If the surgery must be done, it's important that the veterinarian use good analgesia, Dr. Houpt says, adding that declawing with a laser is generally less painful than using a scalpel because it causes less tissue damage.