

## Consider Training Before Declawing Your Cat

By Gina Lewis DVM

Vetters Animal Hospital

I often get questions from clients about declawing their cats. Questions like; how do I keep my cat from destroying the furniture? Why do they have to claw up every new thing I bring into the house? If I have my cat declawed, will it clam down? Why is my cat attacking me? You see there are many reasons why cats claw and scratch. So there are a number of things to consider when addressing the unwanted behavior.

First, let's talk about aggressive behavior. Cats are predators by nature. They love to stalk and attack things. Some cats may want to stalk and attack their owners. We call this play aggression. This can usually be addressed by spending more time playing with your cat. Using toys on strings or poles to play will get them more exercise. Allowing your cat some time to hunt, either outside or inside with the help of toys will help quench that killer instinct. Some cats will do better if they have a playmate, either another cat or dog.

Next, I want to discuss scratching as a marking behavior. This is one way in which a cat will stake out its territory; scratch things to show "ownership". This could be a favorite chair or spot on the couch, wood work near an entrance to a favorite room or door way. To address this behavior, the owner needs to provide an acceptable outlet for scratching put in the area where they want to scratch as well as deter the scratching in unwanted areas.

There are many wonderful scratching outlets available on the market to choose from. Scratching posts wrapped in sisal rope, carpet, wood, and cardboard. The trick is to figure out what your cat prefers. Are they a vertical or horizontal scratcher? Do they like hard surfaces like wood or soft loopy carpet? I recommend owners purchase more than one type and even pick up some cardboard boxes to stand up and put around in areas where kitty wants to claw.

It is also important to deter the cat from going back to the places where it wants to claw. This can be accomplished in different ways depending on the surface you want to protect. Double stick carpet tape or duct tape works great on hard or fabric surfaces that it can be easily removed from. Cats hate the feeling of

something sticky on their little paws. Most cats also hate the feeling of metal under foot, so covering more sensitive surfaces like leather can be accomplished with aluminum foil. If you want to keep them out of a certain room or off a piece of furniture booby trapping the spot works best. Mouse traps are great for deterring pesky felines. Simply set several traps then cover the traps with a single sheet of newspaper. When the cat treads over the traps it will start a chain reaction of snapping traps under the paper and scare them off. There is also a product called a "Scat Matt" this is a matt that can be placed on furniture or carpet and when an animal jumps on them will deliver a harmless shock and scare works too, but cats are clever about figuring out when you are not there to squirt them. So they only invade the area when you are not looking.

Cats can be trained, it takes persistence and patients, but most unwanted clawing behavior can be addressed. Declawing is a painful often an unnecessary surgical procedure. Something else to note; some declawed cats will start to bite and chew stuff to accomplish the same behavior they were doing with claws. The only situation I have come across where declawing surgery is the best option is that of the elderly owner who is not able to do the training suggested and their cat can easily tear their fragile skin causing infection. Most cats can be persuaded to cooperate and will not require surgery; but if it should become necessary, in my clinic, we perform declaw surgeries with a CO2 laser. The laser allows the surgery to be performed with minimal bleeding, swelling and pain. We also provided pain medication before during and after surgery to assure they are as comfortable as possible.