

The Debate on Declawing Cats

Our topics for this week are:

- **Risk of Cat Scratch Disease**
- **Risk of relinquishing house cats**
- **Declawing options**

Cat Scratch Disease

Approximately 20,000 people in the U.S. are diagnosed with Cat Scratch Disease (Bartonellosis) each year. In most cases, the disease starts as a bite, scratch, or other break in the skin that has been contaminated by cat saliva or cat flea feces to not heal at a normal rate. The regional lymph nodes that filter the body fluids from the skin wound which are generally in the armpit and/or neck, become swollen and tender. Muscle aches, lack of appetite, and joint pain may occur. In about 90% of infected people the disease gradually goes away over several weeks. The disease is much more serious in an estimated 10% of those infected.

In some victims, particularly children 5-9 years old, women over 60 years of age, and people on drugs or with diseases that suppress their immunity, the swollen lymph nodes can become overwhelmed and the infected material form a tract to the surface of the skin and drain. The bacteria can also spread throughout the body and cause infections anywhere, including the brain. The inner lining of the heart (endocardium) is especially susceptible. The death rate with people who have Bartonella endocarditis is particularly high.

Cat Scratch Disease was recognized and named in 1931, but the bacteria was not identified until 1988. The name came from a clear association in 1931 with cats and scratches. More recently, cat fleas and their feces have been recognized as another means of transmission. About 40% of cats, primarily kittens, will get bartonellosis. None show any signs of disease. The organism may stay in the cats' bloodstream and body fluids for 2 years.

Declawing Techniques

Prevention efforts are basically avoiding any combination of skin wounds, cat saliva, and fleas. Cats play and defend themselves first with their paws. Claws can cause scratches and be contaminated with dry saliva or flea feces. Declawing cats can be a reasonable means to reduce the exposure to Cat Scratch Disease. However, many people are discouraged from having a cat declawed because of poor surgical technique and risks of complications.

There are 3 ways to declaw cats: the guillotine method with nail trimmers, the scalpel method, and laser surgery. The most crude method is the guillotine method, and it has the highest rate of complications. This used to be the primary method of declawing in veterinary colleges. The scapel method has less problems, and the laser method provides the best results and lowest complications. The outcome of each these is highly dependent on a surgeon who is experienced with the technique being used.

Relinquished Housecats

Cats kept indoors that are not declawed are more often relinquished or abandoned because of wounds to handlers and destruction to furniture, heirloom quilts, etc. Cats with claws can easily injure other cats or dogs. Injuries to the eyes of dogs from cat claws are not unusual. Physical injuries to the skin of the elderly is easy with cat claws. Elderly skin is thin with little elasticity, and many older people are on anticoagulants (blood thinners) which can lead to significant bleeding from otherwise minor scratches.

Options to Declawing

There are other options to declawing. You can train cats to use a scratching post and if successful, it could save your furniture but it does not reduce the risk of your skin being scratched. You can glue soft plastic caps on the nails, but they have to be reapplied in 4-6 weeks when they fall off. Damage to furniture and scratches can occur between the time the caps fall off and when new ones are applied. Applying the caps may put the handler at increased risk of being scratched. Trimming the nails once per week temporarily reduces the risk of furniture damage but the procedure of trimming the nails can put the handler at increased risk of being scratched and even being bitten. All the alternatives are temporary, but cats can often live to be 15 to 20 years old. There is no assurance that if the primary owner is no longer able or willing to continue the trimming or gluing of caps on the nails that someone else will. Declawing is permanent.

I have an indoor cat and a barn cat. My indoor cat, Todd, is declawed because I want to protect my family and visitors from the risk of Cat Scratch Disease, our dogs from eye injuries, and our furniture from destruction so that Todd has a forever home. Todd was declawed by an experienced surgeon using a laser. There were no short-term or long-term complications. Our hard-working barn cat is not declawed. Most of my life I have had an indoor cat. Every housecat has been declawed. None has had any problems from the declawing. None has ever damaged furniture, been relinquished, or caused Cat Scratch Disease.

Bans on Declawing Cats

There are cities in California that ban declaws and in 2019, they were banned in the State of New York. They are now banned in St. Louis, MO. The American Association of Feline Practitioners now strongly discourages declaws. Yes, there are veterinary surgeons who do a bad job at declawing cats. There are also those who do a bad job at spays and neuters. However, no one is trying to pass laws to prevent all veterinary surgeons from doing any spays or neuters. There should be no bans on medical procedures considered beneficial to an animal's welfare by an owner and their veterinarian.

The answer to whether cats should be declawed should vary with the situation. Some cats should be declawed by the best method available to protect them and their handlers. Other cats should not be declawed. Absolutely no cat should be declawed by an inexperienced or otherwise inept surgeon.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Cat Scratch Disease bacteria is common in young cats.**
- 2. Cat Scratch Disease can be life-threatening in children, the elderly, and immune-compromised individuals.**
- 3. Surgical expertise in declawing varies with the surgeon and with the technique used.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources. My new spiral-bound handbook, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and can be found on Amazon as well as from other book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com. This website has more than 150 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.