

House Bill 3494 A-Engrossed (Declawing - Comments & Overview)

General Comments

Declawing a cat is not a decision any veterinarian takes lightly and is always done in the best interest of the cat, the owner, and the environment. When a veterinarian and a cat owner reach a discussion about their alternatives in declawing a cat, it is usually at a point where the scratching has become destructive or a potential concern for infection to family members.

HB 3494-A Engrossed reflects, for the most part, the position of the Oregon Veterinary Medical Association on surgical declaw. However, we oppose the Dash-5 amendment – on grounds of public health, animal health and animal welfare – as it would restrict this allowance.

When a surgery is considered, doctors can guide cat owners through an ever-growing variety of nonsurgical and behavioral corrections. Veterinarians who perform declaw surgery consult with and counsel their clients beforehand. This includes discussion of alternatives such as double-sided tape, nail caps, environmental enrichment, and better training for cat owners. Most often the owner approaches the veterinarian about surgical declaw after other alternatives have failed. The client loves their cat and wants to preserve the bond they share, but is unsure what to do.

When other alternatives have been tried without success – and after careful consideration and discussion with clients – surgical declaw may be the only option to keep that family together, to preserve the relationship and bond between the cat and the family. The other choices would be relinquishment of the cat, possible abandonment or placement outside, and potential euthanasia.

Veterinarians are thoughtful about their feelings and observations of declaws. There are those who philosophically do not support declaw surgery, and there are others who do not provide this service yet believe it should be left to the discretion of the veterinarian in consultation with his or her client. And there are others, still, who are not confident in their own surgical skills but trust another colleague with more experience in surgery to perform the procedure.

Overview

Overall, available scientific literature – outside the realm of pain management – studying surgical declawing is fairly limited. However, here is what we know from the information:

- Scientific data indicate that cats that have destructive scratching behavior are more likely to be euthanized, or more readily relinquished, released, or abandoned, thereby contributing to the homeless cat population. The OVMA and AVMA believe that where scratching behavior is an issue as to whether or not a particular cat can remain as an acceptable household pet in a particular home, surgical onychectomy may be considered. More specifically:

- Scratching is a normal behavior of cats, but destructive scratching represents approximately 15 to 42% of feline behavior complaints.
 - Surveys of cat owners who declawed their cat report a perceived increase in the quality of the owner-cat relationship as a result.
 - Declawing may also be performed to protect people, particularly those who are geriatric, diabetic or have compromised immune systems and so may suffer further health complications from cat scratches.
 - In a 1991 survey of Ontario veterinarians, respondents indicated that approximately 50% of their clients whose cats had been declawed would no longer own their cat if it had not been declawed. Unacceptable behaviors such as daily scratching increased the risk of relinquishment of an animal to a shelter, and declawing decreased the risk of relinquishment. Because national statistics show that approximately 72% of cats relinquished to animal shelters are euthanized, owners may be faced with the choice of declawing their pet cat or potentially condemning it to death. **Note:** The Animal Shelter Alliance of Portland (ASAP) is an innovative program that has a save rate of 91% of cats relinquished to local shelters, but the strength of this program is not reflected in the rest of Oregon, which appears to be around 50%..
 - Studies have not revealed a significant difference in serious behavior problems between declawed and clawed cats.
- Veterinarians fear that cats' welfare will be seriously harmed in the state of Oregon if veterinarians are no longer able to use information about their patients, in conjunction with their professional judgment, to determine when it is appropriate to declaw individual cats. The likely outcome of this legislation, if amended to prohibit surgical declaw, is the relinquishment and euthanasia of an unknown number of cats that otherwise would be able to remain in good homes.
 - Some studies suggest a lower complication rate associated with declawing than with spay/neuter. Like declawing, spay/neuter is performed primarily to address human concerns (i.e., pet overpopulation, roaming behaviors), rather than for the benefit of individual animals.
 - Opponents of declawing often suggest that declawing increases undesirable behaviors such as biting or house-soiling. While empirical studies show that behavioral changes may occur, they do not provide strong support for a net increase in problem behaviors.
 - One study of 122 cats revealed no significant difference in serious behavior problems between declawed and clawed cats.³²
 - Another, of 877 cat owners, suggested that declawed cats were not more likely to bite than clawed cats.⁴⁹
 - One smaller study found that 3 of 25 (12%) cats exhibited increased biting behavior following declawing and one began to defecate outside the litter box; however, declawed cats had better scores for overall good behavior than did clawed cats.²³ While six of 39 (15%) cats house-soiled following declawing,³⁵ because the overall incidence of house-soiling in cats (clawed and declawed) is reported to be 16%,³² there does not appear to be an increased risk of house-soiling following declawing.

- Finally, a study addressing risk factors for relinquishment of cats to animal shelters²⁸ did not observe a statistically significant difference in aggression or inappropriate elimination between declawed and clawed cats. Therefore there is not strong evidence that declawing increases the risk of undesirable behaviors or decreases the observance of desirable behaviors.²³

These statements are based on data cited in *Literature Review of the Welfare Implications of Declawing of Domestic Cats*, American Veterinary Medical Association, April 9, 2009, unless specifically referenced otherwise.

Note: Analgesia and pain management are imperative for surgical declaw. In fact, Oregon law requires that veterinarians provide multi-modal pain management that encompasses planning for the management of pain from prior to surgery and post-surgically. Studies indicate that extended post-surgical pain management helps cats recover more quickly from surgery.

Sincerely,

Glenn

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