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Onychectomy

Declawing

Affected Animals:

Cats.

Overview:

Declawing is the permanent surgical removal of an animal's front toenails. Although many animal welfare organizations strongly discourage declawing, some pet owners have their cats declawed in order to avoid having to give up their pets. Owners often opt for this procedure in order to curtail a cat's persistent scratching of furniture or people, climbing up window treatments, or other damage caused by a cat's natural instinct to mark its territory. Declawing is also used in less common cases requiring the surgical removal of one or more digits, such as infection or trauma.

Declawing should only be performed on those pets that will be kept strictly indoors. Cats that have a chance of getting outside should not be declawed, since their ability to climb out of harm's way or defend themselves in a battle will be compromised. Younger, smaller animals tolerate declawing better than those that have matured into adulthood.

Description:

Declawing is performed under general anesthesia so that the cat feels no pain during the surgery. Often, the procedure is practiced simultaneously with neutering or spaying. Preoperative bloodwork prior to the procedure is sometimes advised.

During surgery, a tourniquet is applied to the leg to control bleeding. The entire toenail is removed either by cutting the ligaments of the joint using a scalpel, or by making a cut with a sterilized nail trimmer. To prevent regrowth of any nail tissue, the remainder of the bony portion is removed with forceps and a scalpel. Care is taken to spare the toenail pads during the surgery, and a pressure bandage is applied to each foot to control postoperative bleeding when the tourniquet is removed. The bandages are removed in one to two days. While the pet is hospitalized, medications are administered in order to control pain.

The newest advance in declawing is the availability of carbon dioxide laser technology. Some veterinary practices have invested in the equipment and training necessary to provide this service. The laser technique is believed to offer better control of blood loss, and to be a less painful method of declawing.

Prognosis:

Most cats recover fully from the procedure within 10 to 14 days. Although the claws have been removed, the cat will continue to scratch and knead as it did before. This instinctive behavior will remain, but it will no longer result in any damage.

Pre-procedure Care:

As with any surgical procedure that requires general anesthesia, a cat should have its health evaluated by a veterinarian prior to surgery. Older cats should have blood tests performed in order to screen for subclinical kidney problems or disease in other organs.

The veterinarian will instruct the owner when to withhold food and water. Generally, no food is given from the night before surgery until after the operation, and water is withheld the morning of the procedure.

Post-procedure Care:

Once the cat comes home, its activity level should be minimized for the first few weeks. Because regular cat litter can become embedded in the incisions, resulting in infection, either shredded newspaper or a commercially available pelleted newspaper litter should be used instead of cat litter for a seven to 10 day period following the procedure. Until the animal learns to adjust its landings to avoid stubbing the "new ends" of the toes, mild to moderate limping may occur after the cat jumps down from heights. However, the cat should be examined for swelling or infection if the lameness is severe or persistent.

Possible complications of declawing include infection, pain, regrowth of a nail or nails, and chronic lameness. However, if an experienced veterinarian performs the surgery, complications are unlikely to occur.

Prevention:

The decision to have a pet declawed should be made only after carefully considering all the possible options. Preventive measures and training techniques should be started as soon as a cat is brought into the household. It is also advisable to make available at all times alternative scratching media, such as carpeted posts and corrugated cardboard scratch boxes. Trimming the toenails monthly and providing deterrents to inappropriate scratching, such as using scat mats or squirting with a water gun, may also eliminate the need for declawing. Another possible remedy is the application of rubber toenail caps. There is also a surgical procedure called a deep digital flexor tendonectomy, which cuts the tendon that allows the cat to fully extend its toenails. Consult a veterinarian for advice on which procedure is best for an individual cat.