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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
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SB67: Animal Welfare - Declawing Cats - Prohibited Acts

Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
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“Declawing” cats is far more cruel than this seemingly benign term suggests. It sounds like only the cat’s toenail is being trimmed. In reality, this barbaric mutilation actually amputates the last bone of each toe. Simply put, if it were performed on people, it would involve cutting off our top knuckle. The more accurate term would be “**deknuckling**,” and it is sadly estimated to be performed on [25% of all cats in American homes](#).

The trauma caused by this procedure is not short-term. [One study](#) found that 42% of deknuckled cats had ongoing long-term pain and about 25% of cats limped. These amputations can also lead to serious infection, gangrene, tissue necrosis, nerve damage, back pain, bone spurs, and lameness.

Deknuckling is often requested by the owner to address behavioral issues (i.e. scratching furniture). Fully [one-third of cats suffer at least one behavioral problem after surgery](#). For example, litter particles irritate the cat’s paws, causing them to avoid their litter box and urinate and defecate elsewhere. Even after the wounds have healed, deknuckled cats’ paws continue to be sensitive to certain surfaces.

Some pet owners argue that this procedure prevents disease transmission through scratches. However, infectious disease specialists have proven that scratches are less of an infection risk than bites. **Deknuckled cats bite more frequently because they’ve lost their primary means of defense.** Thus, they may be *more* likely to spread disease.

Deknuckled cats sadly also have shortened lifespans. There’s evidence that they are more likely to be dropped off at animal shelters and possibly euthanized due to their behavior changes.

Deknuckling cats is torturous and unwise. The [ASPCA](#) reports that, “declawing has not been proven an effective method for improving other behavioral issues.” We have a moral obligation to protect these animals who are unable to defend themselves.

[SB67](#) would ban this brutal practice; I urge a favorable report to protect our kitties.

HUMAN HEALTH CONCERNS IN ANTI-DECLAW LAWS

Declawing cats is not recommended by any known human health expert. The argument that this practice should be preserved to protect owners is not supported by any of the medical literature, which acknowledges the importance of the human-cat bond while focusing on the danger of cat bites, not scratches. This argument is also not born out in any of the countries or localities that have passed declaw bans without this unnecessary and non-medically indicated exemption.

Medical Literature and Guidance

American Cancer Society – “It’s best if you can avoid bites and scratches while you are getting cancer treatment.... Get your dog or cat’s claws trimmed often so that you’re less likely to be scratched. Scratches should be cleaned and covered until they heal... If your pet bites and breaks the skin, call your doctor. All bites carry the risk of infection and can require hospitalization even in people with normal immune systems. It’s likely you’d need antibiotics and maybe other treatment, depending on the location and severity of the bite. Cat bites are especially likely to become infected, because their long narrow teeth can make deep puncture wounds that are hard to clean.”

<https://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/low-blood-counts/infections/safety.html>

ASPCA – “We do not consider the potential for exposure to zoonotic diseases from cat scratches (including in households with immune compromised people) a valid justification for declawing a resident cat. Notably, in providing recommendations for reducing the zoonotic risk associated with pet bites and other exposure to pet saliva, urine and feces, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Public Health Service suggest simple measures such as sanitation, hygiene, careful selection of pets and changes in animal contact. These recommendations do not include declawing.”

<https://www.aspca.org/about-us/aspca-policy-and-position-statements/position-statement-declawing-cats>

AAFP – “While it has been suggested that onychectomy is acceptable to prevent spread of zoonotic disease(s) to immunocompromised people, current research demonstrates the greater value of proper hygiene and parasite control in the prevention of most common zoonoses. In households where cats come into contact with immune-compromised individuals, extensive education about zoonotic disease potential should be discussed and documented in the medical record. Of note, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not advise declawing cats owned by HIV-infected persons; rather, these individuals ‘should avoid rough play with cats and situations in which scratches are likely.’”

<https://catvets.com/public/PDFs/PositionStatements/2017-DeclawingStatement.pdf>

AAHA – “The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not list declawing as a means of preventing disease in either healthy or immunocompromised individuals.”

<https://www.aaha.org/about-aaha/aaha-position-statements/declawing/>

CDC: “Research has shown that cats can provide emotional support, improve moods, and contribute to the overall morale of their owners. Cats are also credited with promoting socialization among older individuals and physically or mentally disabled people.” While acknowledging the importance of the human-cat bond the CDC has no recommendations to declaw cats; rather, they state “When getting a

new pet, avoid animals that are sick, feral, or young (cats and dogs under 6 months old). These animals are more likely to carry diseases that can make you sick.”

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/pets/cats.html>;

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/specific-groups/high-risk/organ-transplant-patients.html>

CMA – “Exercise caution when playing with cats to limit scratches; keep cats’ nails short (declawing is not recommended)”

<https://www.cmaj.ca/content/187/10/736#sec-16>

Canadian VMA – “It has been suggested that PDA be performed on cats in order to decrease the health risk to immunocompromised humans. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not list PDA as a means of preventing disease in either healthy or immunocompromised individuals”

<https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/documents/partial-digital-amputation-onychectomy-or-declawing-of-the-domestic-felid-position-statement>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, and the HIV Medicine Association of the Infectious Diseases Society of America: “Declawing is not advised, but individuals with HIV should avoid rough play with cats and situations in which scratches are likely.”

https://clinicalinfo.hiv.gov/sites/default/files/guidelines/documents/Adult_OI.pdf

NIH: In an extensive article analyzing the risks of pet ownership, while the agency advises against immuno-compromised individuals from owning very young animals (under the age of 6 months) due to increased behavioral issues and notes the danger of a cat biting an individual, there is no mention of declaw as a suggested or appropriate risk management action.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3096326/>

Existing Bans

- The state of New York has banned declawing and doesn’t allow exceptions for human health.
- Declawing is prohibited in Los Angeles (CA), San Francisco (CA), West Hollywood (CA), Santa Monica (CA), Berkeley (CA), Beverly Hills (CA), Burbank (CA), Culver City (CA), Denver (CO), St. Louis (MO), Austin (TX), Pittsburgh (PA), St. Louis County (MO), and Madison (WI). None of the local laws allow exceptions for human health.
- Canada – In the provinces of Nova Scotia, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Alberta, Newfoundland & Labrador, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, declawing is prohibited and none of the provinces allow exceptions for human health.
- Mars Veterinary Health – The 2000 V CA, Banfield, and BluePearl clinics operated by Mars Veterinary Health and which employ 10,000 v eterinarians, announced in 2020 that they “must always do the right thing for our patients and...can no longer support declaw procedures in cats...” Mars Veterinary Health does not allow exceptions for human health.
- The World – Declawing is not permitted in much of the world. Many countries, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Austria, and Sweden, have laws that prohibit declawing. None of these laws allow exceptions for human health.