

# **Ask the Vet: Declawing**

**By: Crista DeJoia, DVM, HOV Staff Veterinarian**

Behavioral problems are among the most common reasons given for relinquishment of pet cats to animal shelters, with house soiling and aggression toward people among the most commonly cited problems. Heart of the Valley Animal Shelter is no exception to this trend. We currently have a significant number of cats with litter box or aggression issues that are “long stays” with us due to the degree of difficulty associated with finding these animals suitable homes.

Interestingly, many of the HOV cats mentioned previously are also declawed. Research studies aimed at determining if there is a direct link between declawing cats and later behavioral problems (such as house soiling and aggression) have been very contradictory, with no clear answer to the question. However, if you ask an animal shelter worker if declawed cats in their shelter commonly exhibit behavioral problems, you will most likely get an overwhelming “YES!” Twelve of the 16 declawed cats we currently shelter at HOV have litter box issues, aggression issues, or both. Cats at HOV who show litter box avoidance are given a medical work-up to rule out physical reasons for the behavior, but a majority of these animals have no underlying health issues. Shelter staff must then try and discern the reason for not using the litter box, such a litter preference or preference for a specific box type. Unfortunately, these cats are difficult to place due to their history of house soiling, especially since they are not considered great “outdoor cat” candidates due to their declawed status.

So what can be done about this issue? It starts with owner counseling, both at the animal’s veterinarian before the declaw procedure and at the shelter, before relinquishment of the cat. The decision to declaw a cat should be made after the owner has received information regarding the benefits and possible complications (both physical and behavioral) of the procedure, and has been informed about non-surgical ways to deal with scratching and clawing. It is our job at HOV to ensure that owners have the information they need regarding strategies to curb these behavioral problems before they make the decision to surrender their pet. There is no right or wrong answer to the “declaw debate”, but educating pet owners is the best way to ensure that cats have the best possible chance for a healthy, happy life - claws or no claws.