

## The Barbaric Cosmetic Procedure Your Dog Can Live Without

Unfortunately, the American Kennel Club (AKC) still considers this an acceptable practice in some breeds, yet it's not unlike removing your pet's thumbs. They're essential for traction and stabilization, and removing them is an unnecessary, painful procedure.

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dewclaws are the “extra” nails on dogs’ paws; they are typically found on the front paws, but can also occur on rear paws, or all four paws
- Front dewclaws are attached by bones to the leg; rear and double dewclaws are typically attached only by skin
- Front dewclaws serve several important purposes, and removal for cosmetic vs. health reasons is thankfully become a relic of the past
- The purpose of rear dewclaws is undefined, but there should be a compelling health reason to remove them

Most dogs come equipped with four nails on each rear foot and five on each front foot. Dewclaws are the “extra” nails on dogs’ feet, sometimes on the back feet, sometimes on both front and back (called double dewclaws).

### Everything You Need to Know About Dewclaws

The dewclaw is located on the inner part of the foot, up the ankle a bit from the other four nails. Dewclaws on a dog’s front feet can be loosely compared to human thumbs; on the back feet, they’re more like big toes.

Another difference is that front dewclaws are attached by bones to the leg, whereas rear and double dewclaws are typically attached by skin and are therefore much more mobile. Just like the other four nails that touch the ground, front dewclaws have their own nerve and blood supply, muscles, and tendons.

Front dewclaws serve an important purpose. When they run, dogs often bend their front feet sufficiently that the dewclaws are in contact with the ground. When a dog is running at high speeds, turns while running, or runs on slippery surfaces, the dewclaws provide added traction and help stabilize the wrist joint. This is also true for dogs involved in agility.

In addition, dewclaws come in handy for climbing trees (which some dogs do), and firmly holding recreational bones or chew toys. Dogs who’ve fallen through ice into water use their dewclaws to help them climb back out. The functionality of dewclaws attached only by skin are a mystery.

## Dewclaw Removal Controversy

Dewclaw removal surgery, like ear cropping and tail docking, is primarily a cosmetic procedure that like the other two, has fallen out of fashion, thankfully, and is no longer routinely performed.

Since front dewclaws serve an important purpose, and because removing them has the potential to cause stress, pain, or infection after the procedure and/or during the recovery period, the consensus among veterinarians and animal welfare advocates is that they shouldn't be removed unless there's a health reason to do so, such as an injury so severe that removal is in the dog's best interest.

However, since severe dewclaw injuries and disease rarely happen, there's no justification for removing dewclaws as a preventive measure.

Some veterinarians remove rear or double dewclaws attached only by skin to prevent future injury, but again, since these injuries are uncommon, there doesn't appear to be any real benefit to the dog.

Unfortunately, the American Kennel Club (AKC) considers dewclaw removal in some breeds to be an acceptable practice that is "integral to defining and preserving breed character and/or enhancing good health."<sup>1</sup>

## Dewclaw Removal Procedure

When front dewclaws are removed, the procedure typically takes place before the puppy is five days old. Because the surgery is simple and quick, general anesthesia isn't used, but that doesn't mean it's not intensely painful. After all, we're removing their thumbs while they're conscious. Many veterinarians use a local lidocaine injection as a pain blocker, but the injection itself hurts, and pups still cry and feel pain. Infection or regrowth of the nail aren't common but do happen.

Rear dewclaws, which are attached to skin instead of bone are more easily removed than front dewclaws, but the procedure is still painful for the pup without appropriate interventions.

Dewclaw removal in older animals requires general anesthesia, and the dogs typically must wear leg bandages and an E-collar or similar for several days following surgery. It's not uncommon for dogs to chew off their bandages and go to work on their incisions, removing sutures and inviting infection.

That's why it's also not uncommon for dogs to require re-bandaging and longer recovery times, along with antibiotics if an infection occurs at the incision site. Some dogs even need to be anesthetized again and re-sutured.

## Caring for Your Dog's Dewclaws

Front dewclaws, which rarely touch the ground, typically grow a bit longer than the other front nails and should be trimmed every few weeks to every few months depending on the dog. Many dogs are actually more comfortable having their dewclaws clipped than their regular nails.

Rear dewclaws are typically trickier due to their somewhat odd location and abnormalities of the nails themselves. They may grow quickly or sit closer to the pad which makes trimming a challenge

Ripped or injured nails are common in dogs, but injuries are actually more common in the four nails that touch the ground than in normal dewclaws. Ingrown dewclaws can be painful and lead to infection, and in addition, infections or growths in the nail bed can affect the dewclaw.

## Signs Your Dog May Have a Nail Problem

It's estimated that 12% of lesions on dog nails and nailbeds are tumors. Most often, this occurs on the front nails. In many cases, the tumor is benign, but see your veterinarian to be sure. A biopsy may be needed for diagnosis.

Because there are so many causes of nail disease, you should seek veterinary care for an accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment plan. In general, the following signs may indicate that your dog is suffering from nail or nailbed disease:

- Paw licking
- Difficulty walking
- Pain in the paws
- Swelling or redness around the nail
- Abnormal nail color or texture

If only one nail is affected, injury is the probable cause. If multiple nails are involved, there's more likely to be an underlying disorder causing the symptoms.

One of the best ways to prevent nail injuries in your pet is to keep her nails trimmed and clean. Nails must be trimmed very carefully to avoid cutting into the quick (which could lead to infection). You can find tips for trimming your dog's nails in the video below.

## Sources and References

[PetMD February 10, 2023](#)

[VetInfo](#)

[Petful January 8, 2019](#)

<sup>1</sup> [AKC Statement on AVMA Crop and Dock Policy, November 26, 2008](#)

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