



Polydactyl Cats

By Brenda F. Barnette, CEO

Polydactylism, sometimes shortened to poly, is a term that describes a genetic mutation that causes animals or humans to have more than the normal number of fingers or toes. Cats normally have 18 toes, four toes and a dewclaw on each front foot, and four toes on each back foot. The dewclaws are equivalent to thumbs and are located higher on the leg than the other toes.

Polydactylism, prevalent in cats, is believed to be a genetic mutation that helped early cats survive. This "extra equipment" may have enhanced their ability to climb and fend for themselves. These unique cats were thought to be the bravest of all cats, and the most successful hunters. You may have heard cats referred to as "mitten cats," "thumb cats" and "six-finger cats."

Polydactyl cats were sought-after mascots on British ships. Sailors believed that poly cats were "lucky," and they considered them to be superior mousers and ratters. It is said that polydactyl cats sailed on the Mayflower and were among the early European settlers arriving to the new world from England.

If you share your home and heart with a polydactyl feline, be sure to check the claws regularly to ensure that they are not becoming overgrown and embedded in the paw pad. Since you keep her safe inside your home, she doesn't have to climb for safety or hunt her own food to survive. The shorter toes may not reach the scratching post, so your favorite feline may need your help to keep the nails short. You will also want to pay particular attention to her dewclaws and keep them trimmed as well.

Polydactylism is not a physical trait that is exclusive to cats. In Norway, the Lundehund, a breed of dogs first recorded in the 15th century, is polydactyl. The dog was used to catch "Lunde," birds the size of penguins. The six-toed dogs were able to climb the rocky cliffs where they were good at digging in the tunnels where the birds nest.

According to Ernest Hemmingway, "One cat just leads to another." Hemmingway lived on Key West, Florida and shared the island with nearly 50 cats. His cats included a six-toed polydactyl, Snowball, given to him by a ship's captain. Later he got a second poly named Princess. The cats bred and the polydactyl trait became common, and the poly cats became known as "Hemingway Cats."

President Theodore Roosevelt had a well-known polydactyl cat named Slippers. Slippers was one of the earliest feline residents of the White House, and she was often the center of attention at public events.

Cats make fabulous companions whether they have the standard 18 toes or more. Albert Schweitzer summed it up when he said, "There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and cats."