The Purpose of the Dew Claw on Dogs

by Adrienne Farricelli

***Dew Claw Anatomy***

Those curious toenails sitting on the inside of your dog’s front legs, and sometimes on the hind legs, are known as "dew claws." Sometimes referred to as "thumbs," these protrusions can be a subject of controversy among canine owners and professionals. Are they useless appendages or does Rover truly need them for his daily activities? There are five tendons attached to the dew claw and at the end of a tendon there is, of course, a muscle, according to veterinarian Christine Zink. The presence of such muscles suggests that dew claws do have a function.

***Dew Claw Function***

Dew claws can help support the dog's lower legs and prevent torque should the dog need to turn. When some dogs are cantering or galloping, the dew claws make contact with the ground as the dog's paws land on the ground. When the dog makes a swift turn, the dew claw digs into the ground and prevents the leg from twisting and from developing carpal arthritis or other injuries over time, according to veterinarian Zink, who also works with canine athletes and specializes in the rehabilitation of performance-related injuries.

***Dew Claw Purpose***

Although you might never see Rover send text messages, consider that dew claws are not dead appendages; they can be used for several purposes. For instance, they can aid in keeping objects such as bones, toys and even sticks steady while the dog chews on them. Dogs also might use their dew claws to gingerly scratch an itch, remove something stuck from their teeth or perform several other useful tasks including climbing and some canine sport activities.

***Dew Claw Removal***

Deciding whether Rover's dew claws should be removed is a personal choice that should be evaluated carefully. Your dog's breed, activity levels and the terrain he works on can be important factors to consider. While the front dew claws appear to have a function and some purposes, the loose, floppy rear dew claws, occasionally found in some dogs, are better off removed if they are prone to getting caught, unless otherwise noted by the breed standard, suggests Bonnie Dalzell, a Borzoi breeder and dog trainer. For some breeds being shown such as the Briard, Beucheron and Great Pyrenees, indeed, those double dew claws are required by standard and their absence can be a serious fault.