

# These Toes Were Made for More Than Scratching: The Case Against Feline Toe Amputation

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# More Than Scratching

Scratching is hard-wired - it's a cat's keyboard

Olfactory markers, Visual markers, Remove old nail sheaths, Exercise/stretching, Feels good



# Feline Toe Amputation

As more cats were being kept indoors, in conjunction with the invention of kitty litter, the idea of declaw surgery was first presented in a letter to the editor in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* in 1952 by a Chicago veterinarian

No study of short-term or long-term effects

Just an idea

# Feline Toe Amputation

"Onychectomy is an amputation and should be regarded as a major surgery" (AVMA)

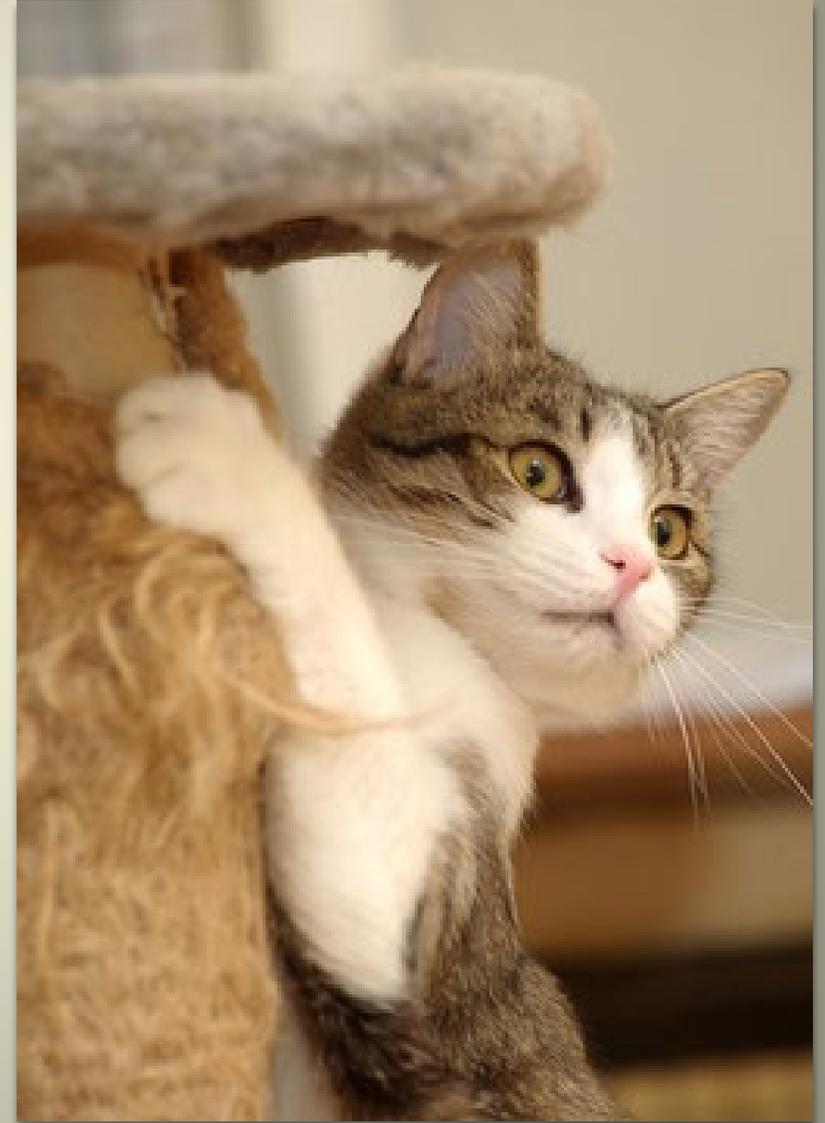
Removal of the third phalanx - analogous in humans to cutting off each finger at the last knuckle

Tendonectomy - - severing the tendon that controls the claw in each toe, so cats keep their toes but can't control them



# How Common?

- 21% of cats at vet hospitals near Raleigh (2013)
- 24% Potronek study (2001)
- 45% of cats in Indiana phone survey (1997)
- 24% JAVMA study (2005)



# Excuses for Feline Toe Amputation

Concerns about scratching children

Autistic children

Immune suppressed or seniors in the home

Destructive scratching - cats now live indoors



# Concerns About Scratching Children

Amputated cats are generally more likely to bite

**MOST IMPORTANT - teach APPROPRIATE play!**



# Cats and Autistic Children

These countries have autistic children  
(and immunocompromised folks), yet feline  
toe amputation is **banned**

Austria

Australia

Brazil

Finland

Germany

Netherlands

New Zealand

United Kingdom



# Immunosuppressed/Seniors at Home

CDC does NOT recommend toe amputation or  
relinquishment

CDC recommendations:

Cats live inside (less prone to parasites)

Cats have appropriate flea protection  
(*Bartonella* exposure)

Play using interactive cat toys

If amputated, cats may be more likely  
to bite (potentially a more  
serious issue for this population)



# Destructive Scratching

1.4 million feline euthanasias in shelters annually - at least half are behavior related

Inappropriate elimination leads the list at 37 to 43% among reasons for relinquishment

Additional reasons cited:

Aggression - 10 to 18%

Biting - 14%

Intolerant of children - 11%

Destructive Scratching - 8 to 10% (low on the list)

# Things to Consider

Onychectomy has long and short-term complications, including pain, hemorrhage, soft tissue swelling, nerve trauma, infection, lameness (Patronek 2001; Mission et al 2002)

Some suggestion amputated cats are more likely to bite and eliminate inappropriately (Patronek 2001; Yeon et al 2001)

Phantom pain common post amputation in humans - but we can't ask cats; "Pain literature suggest it's likely" (Downing 2016)

When pain is poorly managed at the outset (e.g. at surgery) this means ongoing, perpetual, self-sustaining chronic maladaptive pain that constitutes life-long torture (WSAVA, 2014; Costigan, 2009; Dahl, 2011)

Cats still not receiving aggressive multi-modal post-operative pain management, setting the stage for "forever pain"

# Things to Consider

Approximately 60% of a cat's body weight is carried on front feet

Amputation alters foot biomechanics & changes how cats move

Altered biomechanics enhances development/progression of OA

(Downing 2016)

63% of cats showed radiographic evidence of residual P3 fragments from poor surgical techniques (Martell-Moran, Solano, et al, 2017) "Like walking on nails" (Downing 2016)

Association between declaw & back pain (altered biomechanics), aggression & barbering, plus inappropriate elimination (neuropathic pain in feet); odds of relinquishment likely greater than from scratching; biting/aggressive cats more dangerous than cats who may scratch humans (usually by accident)

"In view of these findings the on ongoing practice of declawing cats should be further questioned." (Martell-Moran, Solano, et al, 2017)

# Things to Consider

18 declawed cats with a history of missing their litter boxes a two week trial of a pain relief drug (Buprenorphine) and 90 percent begin to use their boxes regularly again (Gaskin, 2017)

This reflects chronic maladaptive pain...

Many declawed cats develop hyperflexion, or club-footedness - - a callous on the hyper-flexed digit paw pad is common and is *abnormal*

Walking on the amputated toe tips is painful and this chronic pain worsens over time - - pain can be so intense that they may have increased cortisol and an increased risk of diabetes

Owners may not report pain but do report changes in cats' personalities - some bite, some hide more

Gait changes make arthritis more likely (Gaskin, 2017)

# Things to Consider

So, does feline toe amputation prevent problems or add to them... more biting, inappropriate elimination, aggression to people and/or other cats?

Both the AVMA and the AAFP have (finally) started to move toward a removal of feline toe amputation as an inappropriate procedure for veterinarians to perform



# Let's Talk About Pain

Cat owners, by and large, do **NOT** understand that what we sanitize by calling it "declaw" is actually multiple toe amputation

With new cultural awareness about our returning wounded warriors, more of our clients understand the implications of amputation

# Let's Talk About Pain

From just the pain perspective (we'll get to biomechanics in a moment), feline toe amputation is not as simple as we once thought

First, consider the periosteum, rich in nociceptors (why fractures and OSA are excruciatingly painful)

Also, joint capsules, which are cut during toe amputation, are rich with nociceptors

Next, fragmented bone, common in toe amputation, tries to find a fragment to which to heal leading to sharp proliferative edges

# Let's Talk About Pain

Proliferating or leftover sharp bone spurs perpetually poke at the underside of the skin at the end of the remaining toe

Only a few studies have evaluated the presence of leftover bone fragments or the regrowth of bony tissue, but it happens and condemns these cats to walking on needles/nails

Remember, cats live to mask their pain

# Let's Talk About Pain

Now let's talk about neuropathic pain...

Post-amputation pain is an enormous issue in human medicine - - acknowledged to be hugely prevalent and generally refractory to treatment (as many as 2/3 of patients undergoing amputation) - Hsu & Cohen Journal of Pain Research

Discussed as "post amputation pain" (PAP) and "phantom limb pain" (PLP)

Better for us to call it "altered sensation"

# Let's Talk About Pain

Amputation means cutting nerves - - even with aggressive pain management, persistent & perpetual pain happens following cut nerves

Multiple studies in veterinary medicine demonstrate that cats generally do not receive appropriate pain management in the perioperative period

Humans describe their neuropathic pain as "tingling", "burning", "electric-like", "lancinating", "pins & needles", and "unpredictable" (Woolf, et al 2006)

# Let's Talk About Pain

Cats are wired just as we are - - nerves are nerves

Thus the probability of developing abnormal sensation is exceptionally high

Manifestation may include:

Reluctance to walk on certain surfaces

Reluctance to jump onto or off furniture, cat trees, windowsills, etc.

Over-grooming of feet and/or legs

# Let's Talk About Biomechanics

Toe amputation forever alters the biomechanics of the feet, which alters the biomechanics of the entire body

Toe amputation changes the architecture of the feet adding stresses to tendons, ligaments, and joint capsules

Cats carry 60% of their body weight on the front feet, so altering foot biomechanics alters how the entire body moves

# Let's Talk About Biomechanics

Superimpose chronic, maladaptive, neuropathic post amputation pain onto altered front foot biomechanics and we amplify the downstream implications

The majority of cats >10 years old suffer from OA in at least one joint (Kerwin 2010, Lascelles 2010)

Altered whole-body biomechanics creates ergonomically unsound movement patterns resulting in altered joint force generation & micro-traumas

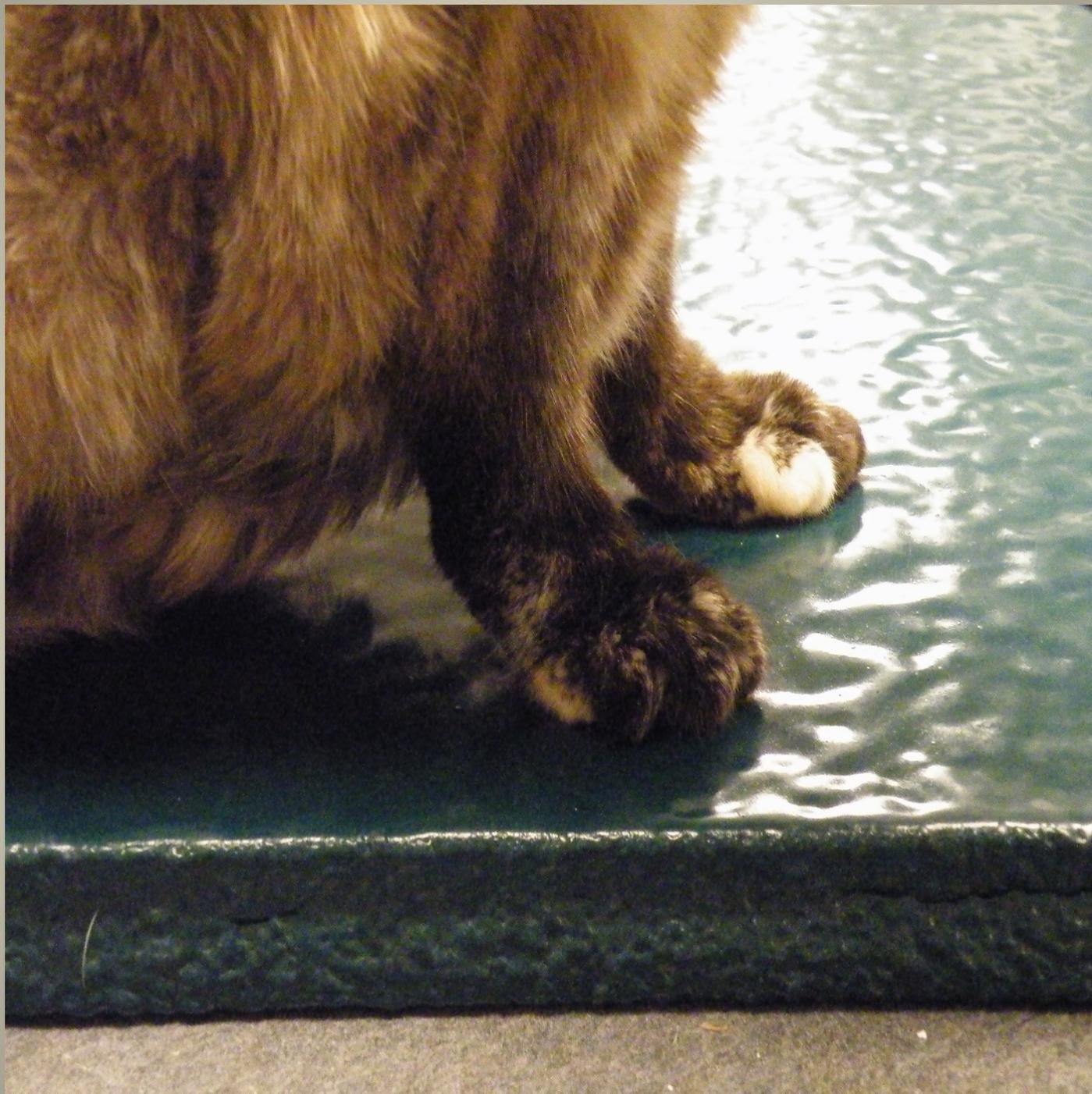
# Let's Talk About Biomechanics

- Altered joint force generation & micro-traumas in turn contribute to the development & progression of OA
- Thus toe amputation impacts more than just the joints of the front feet
- Think facet joints of the spine, stifles (leading to ACL disease), the L/S junction, etc.
- In turn, OA elsewhere in the body adds to the amplified pain experience, altered movement, & interference with normal feline lifestyle

**Seeing  
is  
Believing**









# When Cat Scratching Is Acceptable



# Keeping Cats in Homes

If destructive scratching is solved, then is feline toe amputation even an option?

2 solutions that work:

Behavior modification (takes some time)

Pheromone products to attract cats to appropriate scratching surfaces



~~Punishment~~



Plastic nail caps



Frequent nail trims



Providing appropriate substrates +/- catnip

# PROVIDE SCRATCHERS



# Why Do Cats Scratch Inappropriately?

No posts or not enough for the number of cats in the home

Need both vertical & horizontal choices

Poor location of posts

Substrate choices

Never encouraged or trained cats to use posts

Poor posts (not sturdy, not tall)

Once they've done it - it's theirs



# Scratching Posts

- Horizontal
- Vertical
- How many?





Kim Jong un post



# Location, Location, Location...

- Near where family is
- Near favorite napping location (good stretch when waking)
- Not next to another vertical scratcher (not side by side)
- As a part of feline aerobic center
- Near windows
- Near door most often used by family



# Scratching School: Train Cats (Kittens if Possible) To Use Scratchers

## Tools:

Catnip

Feliway Classic

## Training :

Clicker training

Observational learning

Physically help the cat  
scratch (gently)

Coax with a toy

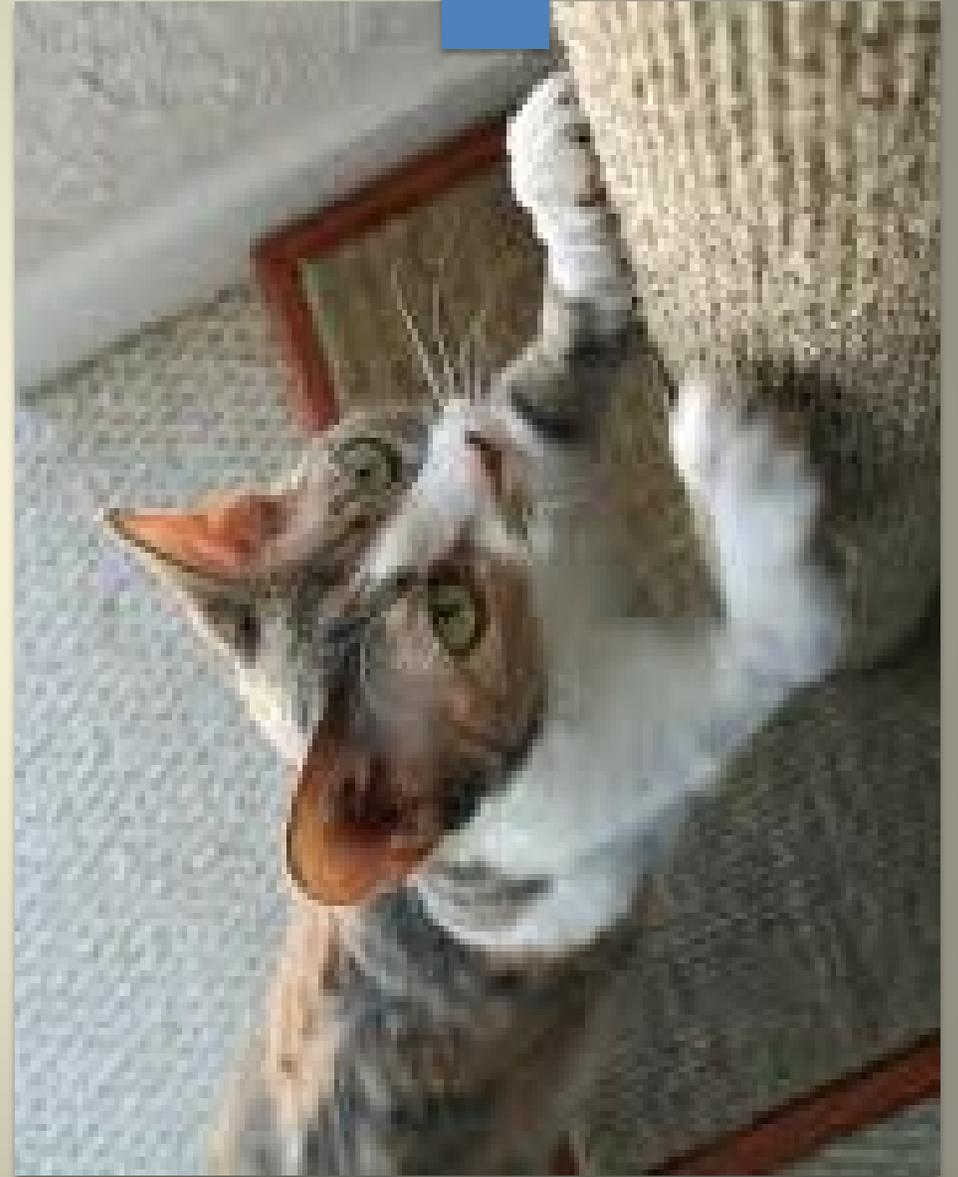


# NEVER PUNISH Cats for Not Using Scratchers

It's simple:

Make places unattractive  
or uncomfortable to  
scratch where the cat *is*  
scratching

Simultaneously offer  
appropriate places to  
scratch



# How Do We Deter Undesireable Scratching?

- Keep nails clipped
- Soft Paws (nail caps)
- Double stick tape or Sticky Paws
- Rug runner (upside down)
- Car mat (upside down)
- Aluminum foil (+/- sprayed with Bitter Apple)
- SSSCAT! (no!!!)
- ScatMat , Pet Shock Mat, Sofa Scram (No!!! These are torture devices)



**So... What Can Be Done Here?**



# Feliscratch By Ceva (Feliway)

Feline Interdigital  
Semiochemical (FIS)

Blue dye

Catnip

*Attracts cats to posts*



# Feliscratch Success

79.7% of cats started scratching  
the post within 7 days

This percentage reached 87% at  
day 28



**N1 - Steve  
Dale's  
Elderly Cat,  
Roxy**



# Roxy on Day 2



# Feliscratch and Behavior Modification

- - No **NEED** for a Mutilating Alternative

If Feliscratch alone is 87% (in adult cats - better in kittens), why wouldn't this *plus* behavior modification be about 100% effective?

**PLEASE** reach out to Ceva about their abysmal decision to D/C Feliscratch!!!





# Let's Talk Bioethics

Traditional medical ethics failed to keep up with emerging advancements

Medical decision-making often not yes/no

Medical professionals distinguished from general population by training, knowledge, special services

Balancing between "What is best for the patient?" and "What is best for the client?"

Asking, "Just because we *can*, does that mean we *should*?"

# Let's Talk Bioethics

Four cornerstones (moral norms) of clinical bioethical decision-making:

Respect for autonomy, Nonmaleficence, Beneficence, Justice/fairness

Respect for autonomy:

Traditionally applied only to clients

Decisions made after delivery of medical info & considering consequences

Positive obligation to deliver comprehensible info

Respect for autonomy (clients):

Truth-telling, Respecting confidentiality, Obtaining consent, Helping with decisions when asked

What about *patients*?

*"... our love for our pets should be shaped and informed by our recognition of the ways in which their needs and their lives are their own, peculiar to the sorts of animals they are..."* (Hursthouse 2011)

# Let's Talk Bioethics

Respect for autonomy (patients):

Preferences expressed much like pre-verbal children

One can argue that cats would prefer to keep their toes

Nonmaleficence:

"Do no harm"

Does amputating P3 of cat toes cause harm?

Pain & altered biomechanics, ADLs, natural behaviors

# Let's Talk Bioethics

## Beneficence:

Acting in the patient's best interest

Can amputating the toes of cats for convenience ever be argued to be in the *cat's* best interest?

Respectfully, this appears to be a self-evident "no"

## Fairness:

Can feline toe amputation ever be argued as fair to the cat with the attendant compromise to comfort and lifestyle?

Again... no

# What Does the Future Look Like?

Several facts have emerged:

We know now more than ever before about the physiology and emergence of persistent maladaptive post amputation pain

Cats are living longer and longer, making the biomechanical alterations/aberrations more important

Cats *do* develop OA, and altered biomechanics contributes

# What Does the Future Look Like?

More facts:

The US is one of *very few* developed nations in the world in which feline toe amputation remains legal

Veterinarians are slow to change (as a profession)

The time has come to make the transformational change to stop this barbaric practice

Since self-regulation seems to be a problem, this mandate will come via legislation

# REMEMBER MUFFIN





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