VETERINARY TODAY INTERNATIONAL
ISSN 2583-8288

Anatomy of the Cat and Its Clinical Significance

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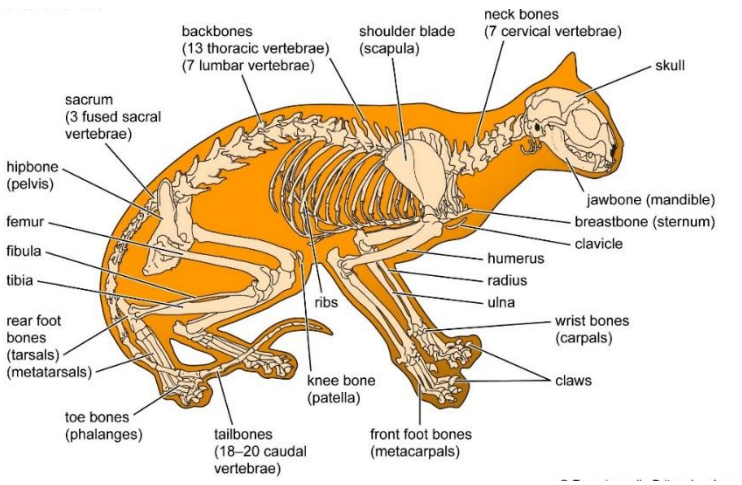
doi.org/10.5281/VeterinaryToday.21321655

Introduction

The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) is a small carnivorous mammal belonging to the family *Felidae*. Cats have gained immense importance not only as companion animals but also as experimental and clinical models in veterinary science. A thorough understanding of feline anatomy is essential for accurate diagnosis, effective treatment, surgical interventions, anesthesia, and imaging interpretation. Compared to dogs and large animals, cats exhibit several unique anatomical features that have direct clinical implications.



Osteology

General Features

The feline skeleton consists of approximately **230–245 bones**, with variation due to the number of caudal vertebrae. It is lightweight, strong, and highly flexible, enabling agility, climbing and jumping. The flexible vertebral column, especially the lumbar region and the rudimentary free-floating clavicle increase mobility and allow cats to squeeze through narrow spaces.

Clinical significance: The flexible skeleton contributes to cats' ability to survive falls but also predisposes them to fractures and vertebral injuries following trauma.

Skull

The feline skull is short, broad and compact with a relatively large cranial cavity. Large forward-facing incomplete orbits provide binocular vision, while inflated tympanic bullae enhance hearing. The dentition is adapted for carnivory with sharp canine and carnassial teeth.

Clinical significance: Knowledge of skull anatomy is essential for managing otitis media, dental diseases such as feline odontoclastic resorptive lesions, maxillofacial fractures, orbital injuries and surgical procedures including bulla osteotomy.

Vertebral Column

The vertebral formula is:

- Cervical: 7
- Thoracic: 13
- Lumbar: 7
- Sacral: 3 (fused)
- Caudal: 18–23

The highly flexible lumbar spine enables rapid spinal extension during running and jumping.

Clinical significance: Flexibility aids the righting reflex during falls but predisposes cats to vertebral fractures, luxations and occasional lumbar intervertebral disc disease.

Limbs

Cats are digitigrade animals with powerful hindlimbs, elongated metatarsals, retractable claws and a free-floating clavicle that increases shoulder mobility.

Clinical significance: Limb anatomy is important for fracture repair, orthopedic surgery, intramuscular injections, rehabilitation and management of claw injuries.

Arthrology (Joints)

Cats possess highly mobile synovial joints, particularly in the shoulder and vertebral column. The shoulder is a ball-and-socket joint with exceptional mobility, whereas the hip provides stability during locomotion.

Clinical significance: Joint flexibility contributes to agility but predisposes cats to luxations, sprains and traumatic injuries. Knowledge of joint anatomy is essential for orthopedic surgery and radiographic interpretation.

Myology

Cats have a muscular system specialized for speed, jumping and stealth. Strong epaxial muscles facilitate spinal movement, while powerful gluteal and femoral muscles generate propulsion for jumping and climbing. A high proportion of fast-twitch muscle fibers enables explosive movement.

Clinical significance: Muscle injuries are common after trauma. Anatomical knowledge guides intramuscular injections, surgical approaches, fracture repair and rehabilitation.

Digestive System

Oral Cavity

Cats possess **30 permanent teeth** (I 3/3, C 1/1, P 3/2, M 1/1). Sharp canine and carnassial teeth are specialized for capturing and shearing meat. The tongue bears keratinized filiform papillae that assist in grooming and food manipulation.

Clinical significance: Periodontal disease and FORLs are common. Hair ingestion during grooming predisposes cats to trichobezoars (hairballs), while tongue lesions interfere with feeding and grooming.

Stomach and Intestines

Cats have a simple stomach and a relatively short intestinal tract adapted for rapid digestion of animal protein. The large intestine is short with minimal fermentation capacity.

Clinical significance: Cats require dietary taurine; deficiency causes dilated cardiomyopathy and retinal degeneration. Hairballs and linear foreign bodies commonly cause gastrointestinal obstruction requiring medical or surgical intervention.

Respiratory System

The feline respiratory tract contains narrow nasal passages and delicate upper airways. The lungs are divided into four lobes on the right and two on the left.

Clinical significance: Narrow airways predispose cats to upper respiratory

infections. Laryngospasm is a significant anesthetic risk during intubation. Knowledge of lung anatomy is essential for thoracic imaging and surgery.

Cardiovascular System

The feline heart has a well-developed left ventricle adapted for high metabolic demands.

Clinical significance: Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM) is the most common cardiac disease in cats. Aortic thromboembolism (saddle thrombus) is a serious complication causing acute hindlimb paralysis.

Nervous System

The feline brain possesses a highly developed cerebral cortex and cerebellum, supporting learning, coordination, balance and precise motor control.

Clinical significance: Neurological examination relies on understanding cranial nerve anatomy. Head trauma commonly results in cerebral or cerebellar injury, producing seizures, ataxia, altered consciousness or visual deficits.

Urogenital System

The kidneys are smooth and bean-shaped, with the left kidney more freely movable than the right. Male cats possess a long, narrow urethra.

Clinical significance: Cats are predisposed to chronic kidney disease (CKD), making routine renal evaluation important. The narrow male urethra predisposes to feline lower urinary tract disease and urethral obstruction by crystals or mucus plugs. Recurrent obstruction may require perineal urethrostomy.

Reproductive System

Female cats are induced ovulators with a bicornuate uterus adapted for multiple offspring. Male cats possess keratinized penile spines that stimulate ovulation during mating.

Clinical significance: Reproductive anatomy is essential for ovariohysterectomy and orchidectomy. Penile spines regress after castration, reflecting testosterone dependence.

Endocrine System

The paired thyroid glands lie adjacent to the trachea and are relatively prominent.

Clinical significance: Hyperthyroidism is common in older cats, causing weight loss, hyperactivity, tachycardia, and polyphagia. Detailed thyroid anatomy is essential during thyroidectomy to preserve the parathyroid glands and prevent postoperative hypocalcemia.

Skin

Cats possess loose, highly elastic skin with rich sensory innervation. Vibrissae (whiskers) function as specialized tactile organs.

Clinical significance: Loose skin enhances escape from predators and facilitates subcutaneous injections. Because skin tenting is unreliable in cats, dehydration should be assessed using multiple clinical parameters rather than skin elasticity alone.

Conclusion

Feline anatomy demonstrates numerous adaptations for agility, predation, and survival. Unique characteristics—including a flexible skeleton, digitigrade limbs, specialized dentition, highly mobile joints, induced ovulation and a narrow male urethra—directly influence disease susceptibility and clinical management.