

Trimming Your Dog's Nails

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Why do you need to do it?

Nails that are left untrimmed can split, break and bleed, causing soreness in the dog's feet and toes, and possible infection. They can get caught on things and tear, or grow so long that they can curl backwards, penetrating the dog's pads.

Many people are reluctant to trim their dog's nails themselves, as they are worried about causing pain or making the nails bleed. It is true that there is a blood vessel and bundle of nerves that runs through the centre of each dog's nail, however if you are careful, prepare your dog properly and learn the technique, you can become confident very quickly.



How do you do it?

Early conditioning to allow your dog to be comfortable with nail trimming is a really important step in making the procedure quick and easy. Many dogs tend not to like having their feet touched, and the pressure and sound of the clippers on the nail can be somewhat disturbing for them. However, through positive reinforcement training, dogs can be desensitized to having their nails trimmed so that the procedure need not be traumatic. Get your dog used to you touching its feet, putting your fingers between its toes, gently squeezing its foot etc., and reward them with a pat, a verbal "good dog" and some kind of a treat.

Many people prefer to have the vet trim their dog's nails but if regular trimming is required it is best to learn how to safely do the procedure yourself so that the nails do not get too long between vet visits. The longer the nails are left to grow without trimming, the harder it is to bring them back to a reasonable length as the 'quick' (the blood vessel that feeds the growing nail) grows long in proportion to the nail and will bleed if cut. Trimming long nails on a weekly basis will help bring them back under control as the 'quick' will retreat into the nail, allowing each cut to shorten the nail until they reach normal length again.

Before you cut your dog's nails for the first time, you may want to get your vet or an experienced dog groomer to provide a demonstration. They will use either a guillotine style of clipper, or one with a simple scissor action. If you are using the guillotine style, make sure the cutting blade is on the side closest to the tip of the nail, so you can see exactly where the cut will be made. It doesn't really matter which style you use, as long as they are sharp, and of good quality. Blunt cutting edges may leave the nail jagged and frayed, and also tend to squash and compress the nail, perhaps causing discomfort for your dog. Alternatively, there are also small electric or battery operated trimming units available, which have a spinning sand-paper wheel in them to grind the nail shorter. These can also be good, as long as you take it slowly and remember that these can just as easily make the nail bleed if you take too much.

For medium to large dogs, I find it easier to have the dog relaxed, and lying on their side, preferably up on a bench, with their legs facing away from me. In this position, it's quite easy to lean across a fidgety dog and hold it firmly in place. However, getting a big dog up onto a bench can also be difficult, so you can try them standing or sitting, while holding them between your legs and picking up one foot at a time. Smaller dogs are ideal to work with on a bench, but can also be restrained if necessary in a semi-cuddle on the lap while clipping their nails. Make sure you have plenty of good light wherever you do it, so you can see exactly where you need to make the cut.

If your dog has light coloured nails, you should be able to see through to the pinkness of the quick running down the centre of the nail, making it easier to decide how close to make the cut without making the nail bleed. Once you are confident with the clipping process, you should be able to clip these nails with only the one cut. However, for dogs with darker nails, you won't be able to see the quick, and so will need to make multiple small cuts to avoid taking too much at once, and risk bleeding. At each small cut, look at the cut surface. As you approach the tip of the quick, the nail will darken in the centre, indicating that you have cut enough off. In white nails a deeper pink shade will appear.

With your free hand, hold each toe in turn with the thumb and first finger. Apply a little pressure so the nail is pushed outwards a little, hold the clippers at about a 45o angle to the line of your dog's pads, and make the cut. If the nail splinters, the rough edges should be filed smooth by filing gently from the back to the front. Much praise should be given during the procedure and frequent rests taken if the dog finds the procedure stressful.

Don't forget to trim the dew claws, which are found a short way up from the foot on the inside of your dog's leg. As they don't touch the ground, they will not get worn down at all, and will need regular trimming.

It is a good idea to have something on hand to stop the bleeding in case you accidentally cut the 'quick'. Products such as ferric chloride or potassium permanganate (bought over the counter from a human pharmacy) are useful. Applying the solution or crystals to the bleeding nail with cotton wool will cause the blood to clot quickly. Many human first aid kits also contain a styptic (blood clotting material) that looks a little like orange cotton wool. This can also be applied to the bleeding nail.

How often is this necessary?

The requirement for nail trimming can vary depending on the breed of dog, its age, its level of exercise and the environment in which the dog is kept. Working and herding breeds are active and generally have compact feet with well arched toes that angle the toenails downwards towards the ground (often referred to as 'cat feet'). If these dogs are active on hard surfaces such as gravel, rock and concrete, their nails may not need trimming until they slow down with age and exercise less, however you will still need to attend to their dew claws regularly. Other breeds may have what are known as 'hare' feet. This means that the nails grow more forward than downward, and therefore no matter how much exercise they get on rough ground, it is unlikely they will wear down naturally. Some dogs may benefit from having the tips of their nails taken off once every week or two, however for most it will be longer than this, and you will have to decide what is right for your dog by inspecting its nails on a regular basis. Certainly if you notice a change in the sound of your dog's nails on hard floors this is a pretty good indication that it is time for a trim.