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## How to Trim Your Dog's Nails

By Diane Blackman, CPDT-KA

Trimming your dog's nails is essential to your dog's overall health..... and it does not have to be something to dread for either you or the dog. Whenever you begin to hear your dog's nails on the floor, it is time to trim!

### Equipment:

There are a variety of clippers and now nail grinder tools to use on your dog's nails. Do not use clippers designed for humans. This handout will outline the steps needed – regardless of the type of tool you use. It is important that you feel comfortable with the equipment that you choose.

### Trimmer Styles:



- **Guillotine-style clippers:** This style of clippers is popular with owners of smaller dogs since it can be easier placing the nail into position. The dog's nail is placed through a metal hoop. The dog's nail is cut as the metal trimmer slides across the nail as the handles are closed. Be sure to position the nail to prevent cutting the quick. The blades need to be replaced frequently and this type of clipper may not be effective for a larger dog's hard nails.



- **Scissor-style clippers:** This style of clipper looks like a scissor with semi-circular blades. The dog's nail is placed through a hole that is created when the blades are open. Once the nail is position, squeeze the handles to trim the nail. As with the guillotine-style clippers, be careful placing the nail in position to prevent cutting the quick. Scissor-style clippers are stronger than Guillotine-style clippers and do not have blades that need to be replaced. However, scissor-style clippers may be difficult to operate if you have small hands since the handles are far apart.



- **Nail Grinders:** This tool grinds the nail down with a coarse sanding bit. There are grinders specifically designed for trimming dog nails or you may use a more general grinder with a coarse sanding bit. You may get a finer and more rounded nail with a grinder than with a clipper. Dogs need to be introduced slowly to the grinder to make them comfortable with the vibration of the grinder on the toe.

**Styptic Powder:** This powder helps stop the bleeding if you accidentally cut the quick, the vein that runs through the toe. If you do not have styptic powder, you may also use flour or cornstarch.

**Old Sock:** If your dog has long fur on the backs on his legs, you may want to use an old sock with the toe cut off to gather the hair to keep it out of the way. This is especially true if you choose to use a nail grinder as it can easily get wound up as it spins.

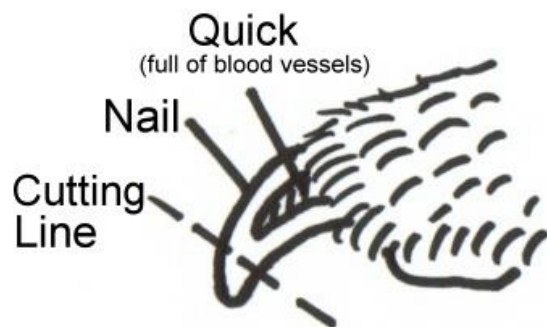


Long fur can easily become wound up.



An old sock can quickly gather long fur

**Treats:** Dogs will probably never learn to love having their feet done. However, they can learn to tolerate it ... especially if there is something in for them! Start by using a higher-value treat such as hotdogs or cheese, whether you are just beginning with a puppy or if you tried to trim nails in the past unsuccessfully. You may be able to use a treat such as a dry biscuit later on to maintain the behavior once they learn they need to stay still.



## **The Trimming**

It is important to progress slowly. Remember, this a marathon, not a sprint! Start by handling your dog's foot. Praise and reward with a treat for the dog allowing you to touch the foot as well as each toe. Also, in the training phase of trimming nails, it is better to do one or two feet every several days instead of doing all four feet in one setting. The more the dog has to practice this behavior, the better he will be.

After your dog is use to you handling his feet and toes, it is time to actually trim them. Have all your supplies handy so you do not have to move once you are set up. The location in your house where you do the trimming is up to you – the bed, the living room floor or on a grooming stand – wherever you feel the most comfortable.

Start by pushing the fur back and the nail forward by pressing with your fingers on the top of the toe. If you are using clippers, use a series of small clips rather than one big clip to cut the nail back – to insure you do not accidentally cut the quick. If you are using a nail grinder, grind down the nail at a 90-degree angle to the growth of the nail in short bursts. Take the nail grinder away from the nail every few seconds to avoid the toe from getting hot. After shortening the nail, round the corners of the nail to prevent scratching if your dog jumps or paws at you later.

Quietly praise your dog for laying still and reward with a treat for each nail he allows you to trim (you may scale back the treats later if you wish.)

### **Nail Color- White Nails**

Dogs with white-colored nails give us the advantage of seeing where the quick ends. When trimming a white toe, view the nail from the side to see the quick. Stop short of the quick to prevent cutting it and causing bleeding.

### **Nail Color- Black Nails**

We cannot see the quick in black-colored nails. For those nails (and it is not uncommon for a dog to have both colored nails), view the nail from the bottom (if possible) so you can trim it down to the point where the nail starts to curves and hollows out.

## **Fighting Back**

Dogs may fight to get out of position or pull their leg back to evade the clippers or nail grinder. Do not make it a battle of wills. If they pull back, simply go with the leg until the dog relaxes. Then put the leg back into position, touch or clip several times and after he tolerates it, then reward with a treat. In the early stages, you may want a helper to hold a spoonful of peanut butter or spray cheese to your dog's nose. This will help distract your dog in the training stages to teach him good things come to those who do not fuss. If you have a dog that can wiggle free, you may put the dog on leash for added control. If he breaks position, gently get him back, touch with the nail grinder or clip and reward. Remember, you want the good behavior to stay! Reward when he is tolerating the trimming instead of when he is fussing.

**TIP: If your dog is well-exercised, he will have less energy to fight back!**

## **Pushing the Quick Back**

As trimming nails becomes a regular occurrence, you will begin to push the quick back. The quick does not want to be at the tip of the nail as it is uncomfortable for the dog. That will, in turn, allow you to trim the nail even shorter -- especially nice if you have hardwood surfaces.

## **Accidents Will Happen**

Regardless of your precautions, you will make a mistake and cut the quick. While it may look like a near-death experience, it is quite a minor wound. Remain calm and dab the styptic powder (or flour or cornstarch) on the tip of the nail to help stop the bleeding. If you forget the powder, press on the nail with your finger to stop the bleeding.

## **The End**

After your dog is finished with his nail trimming, do not immediately let him up. Pet him, tell him what a good boy he is and give him another couple of treats. This will help keep him in position as he will not want to leave too soon when treats may be heading his way!