



Nail Anatomy 101: Keep Trims Safe, Not Scary

A good grounding in nail anatomy is one of the secrets to a nail trim that doesn't cause your dog to run away in fear and you to stress out over giving it. Understanding exactly how and where to trim helps to ensure that you don't "quick" your dog, a painful experience that typically leads to lots of blood and screaming on your dog's part and nail-biting anxiety on your part because you've accidentally hurt your best friend. When that happens, neither of you wants to experience it again, and that means your dog doesn't get the nail care he needs.

It doesn't have to be that way. The following will help you become a nail pro.

What to Know About Toenails

Your dog has a toenail at the end of each toe above the pad, facing forward, four nails on each paw.

Canine toenails are made of a protein called keratin, just like your own nails. A dog's nails are oval; they are wider at the toe and narrower as they grow out.

Inside each nail is the quick, a highly sensitive bundle of nerves and blood vessels. When cut or injured, it bleeds. If nails are clear, the quick appears pink and the nail growing past the quick is white. If nails are dark, the quick isn't as obvious. A bit of trivia: if a dog's paws are white, nails tend to be clear.

Past the quick, the toenails don't have any nerves and they tend to be less sensitive. When handling your dog's paws, healthy nails shouldn't be painful. If you have a puppy, start handling his paws and nails regularly while offering him some special treats. Treats help him to associate the experience as a pleasant one. It doesn't have to be something that creates fear.

Do the Dewclaws

Some dogs have another toe with a nail on the inside of both front legs, both back legs, or all four legs. These toes are located at what we might call the wrist or, on the hind legs, the ankle.

These toes and nails, called dewclaws, are much like a thumb. Tightly attached dewclaws tend to be functional. Dogs with these dewclaws will sometimes use them like a thumb; an aid in holding toys or chews. Other dewclaws are loosely attached and they may be nonfunctional.

Dewclaws need to be trimmed more often than other nails because they rarely touch the ground and so don't wear down. When untrimmed, they grow in a curve and can touch (or actually penetrate) the dog's leg, causing a painful wound.

Not all dogs are born with dewclaws, and some breeders have dewclaws removed when puppies are young. A few breeds, such as Beaucerons, Briards, and Great Pyrenees, are known for having multiple dewclaws.

When and Why To Trim Nails

Generally, your dog's nails shouldn't touch the ground when he's standing upright on all four feet. There is no hard and fast rule as to how far from the floor those nails should be; it varies from dog to dog. If the nails click on the floor, they are usually too long. What's wrong with that?

If nails are long enough that they touch the floor, they push back against a dog's toes, putting pressure against the other structures of the paws. If the nails get even longer, the toes can begin to spread apart, deforming the feet.

As paws deform, they become painful. Your dog will be less likely to play, run, or even walk. He'll also resist when you try to examine or even touch his paws. He can become anxious and worried about his paws.

Those splayed paws are also more prone to injury because the pads are spread apart. Mud balls can form between toes and pads during wet weather, and snow and ice balls will form in winter weather. Mud balls are annoying, but snow and ice balls are dangerous. Besides being painful, frostbite can be a problem.

How to Trim

The goal in trimming toenails is to cut just before the quick, taking off only the sharp point or tip of the nail. Looking at the nail from the side, a nail that is long will often curve downward once past the quick.

With the trimmer in hand, look at one nail, and trim it. Praise your dog and give him a treat. After trimming a few nails on one paw, stop, play with your dog, and take a deep breath. Repeat and you've done it! For more details on preparing a puppy or even an older dog for nail trims and the tools to use, see our earlier article [here](#).

Tomorrow you can do another paw. Later, when you and your dog are more experienced at this you'll be able to do all four paws at one time. Right now, though, one paw at a time is just fine.

This article was reviewed/edited by board-certified veterinary behaviorist Dr. Kenneth Martin and/or veterinary technician specialist in behavior Debbie Martin, LVT. From <https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/nail-anatomy-101-keep-trims-safe-not-scary/>

How To Trim Puppy Nails Without a Fuss

Puppy nails are sharp. Because puppies have yet to learn that jumping on people is unwanted, those sharp nails can do some damage to your skin. It's important then to introduce your puppy to nail trimming as soon as you bring him home. When his nails are trimmed early and often, it becomes a normal part of his life rather than a frightening chore. Our Fear Free tips will help you to teach him that nail trims aren't scary and can even be rewarding.

Accepting Handling

Your puppy needs to learn to hold still while his nails are being trimmed. If he squirms or jerks his paw you could accidentally trim the nail too close and cause it to bleed. You can avoid this by teaching him to become accustomed to having his paws handled.

Lift your puppy onto your lap or sit on the floor and cuddle him. Offer him a treat when he's on your lap, give him a slow, gentle massage, and talk softly to him. Relax him.

When he's relatively calm, gently roll him onto his back, and give him another treat or two. Again, relax him with your hands and voice. When he's calm, massage one of his paws for just a couple of seconds. Give him another treat and let him go.

Repeat this several times a day for several days until he stays calmly on your lap and allows you to touch and massage all four paws, each toe, and each toenail. Now it's time for actual trimming.

Choosing Your Supplies

You'll need several tools to trim your puppy's nails. Gather your supplies and make sure you know how to use them before you attempt any trimming.

There are several types of nail trimmers:

Guillotine cutters have an oval shape at the end. You insert the tip of the nail in that shape and when you squeeze the handle a movable blade cuts the nail. These trimmers are inexpensive but don't always provide the best view of a small toenail.

Scissor type cutters look like scissors except the cutting edges are curved to accommodate the toenail. These are usually easy for most dog owners to use.

A Dremel is a power hand tool with a rotating cylinder with a sandpaper surface. By touching the cylinder to the nail, some of the nail is ground off.

You will also need some treats to act as both a distraction and a reward.

Last, you need something to stop the bleeding should a nail be trimmed too close to the quick. A styptic pencil or powder, often called Quick Stop, will both work.

Trimming Toenails

Invite your puppy on to your lap as you did to restrain him. Have several treats at hand. Take a good look at your puppy's nails before you trim them. If your puppy has white nails, you can see a pink or dark line as you look at the nail from the side. That's the "quick," a bundle of nerves and blood vessels. When you trim the nail, don't trim it so short that you hit the quick. Getting "quicked" is the number-one reason dogs hate having their nails trimmed.

If your puppy has black nails you won't be able to see the quick. In this instance, look at the shape of the nail. From the side, see where the nail curves downward? Trim the nail toward the tip of that curve.

Once you know where to trim, give your puppy a treat. While he's chewing, trim one nail. Praise your puppy. Then give him another treat and trim another nail.

When one paw is done, four nails and perhaps a dewclaw (the thumb), stop for the day, praise your puppy, and play with him. You can do another paw tomorrow.

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8 Steps to Fear Free Nail Trims For You And Your Cat

Do you dread trimming your cat's claws? Does kitty feel the same way as you do? It doesn't have to be that way. Here are some techniques to help both of you get through the process without a meltdown and turn it into an enjoyable bonding time.

Cat Claws 101

Your cat's claws are similar to human fingernails in that they continue to grow throughout her life. Since claws don't wear down naturally, your kitty needs to groom them by scratching a textured surface, like your furniture or carpets. Regular toenail clipping helps prevent destructive clawing, and also helps prevent her nails from getting snagged and torn on anything. When she nests on your lap and extends those claws into your leg, you'll be glad you removed the sharp tips.

Clawful Practice

Start slowly and teach one tiny step at a time, gradually working up to the full procedure as your cat becomes comfortable with each step. It's unlikely you will get through all the steps in one session. The acclimation process may take as long as several weeks, depending on your cat's temperament.

Some cats are uncomfortable being handled. If your cat is one of them, wearing a Thundershirt or other snug garment may help to relieve her anxiety.

1. Choose a time when your cat is cuddling on your lap and gently stroke one paw for just a second or two. Give her a treat before she has a chance to yank her paw away. If she responds well, do the same with another paw. If she doesn't like it, quit for a while. You don't want her to hate sitting on your lap. Repeat this for several days until it is no big deal to her.
2. Gently enclose her paw with your fingers for a few seconds, and reward her with a treat if she tolerates it without a fuss. Gradually work up to all four paws over a period of several days.
3. Use extra yummy treats. For finicky cats, try treats made from fish flakes, canned tuna, baby food, vanilla ice cream, yogurt, cream cheese, or liver pate. Many cats prefer treats they can lick from your finger rather than something you hand to them.
4. Massage her paw with your fingers so she learns to enjoy being handled. You want her to be completely relaxed.

5. A cat's claws retract into a protective sheath unless she purposely extends them. Using gentle pressure, lightly squeeze the top and bottom of her foot to extend her claws. Treat and quit when she allows you to do it without a fuss.
6. While she is relaxing on your lap, introduce the sound of the clippers. Open and close them so she gets used to the sound. Let her sniff them and give her treats to reward her relaxed response.
7. Extend her toenails and clip one nail. Just cut the very tip, maybe 1/16 of an inch. Give her a treat and quit for a while. You'll be able to see the blood vessel, which doesn't extend all the way to the end of the nail. Be careful not to clip into it, because it will be painful and bleed. Keep some styptic powder on hand to stop the bleeding if you miscalculate.
8. As she gets used to the sound and feel of nail clippers, you can work up to trimming more than one nail per session. Follow each snip with a treat and quit before kitty gets restless and tries to leave. When you are done, cuddle with her some more, so she doesn't think she gets kicked off your lap as soon as the clipping session is done.

Trim your cat's nails every 10 days to two weeks. For the first few weeks you might trim one nail a day until she is comfortable with the procedure. With practice you'll both enjoy this time together and look forward to it!

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