

How to Trim a Cat's Nails

Do cats need regular nail trims?

The answer to this question depends on the individual cat and its lifestyle. Cats that spend time outdoors often wear their nails down by climbing trees and other activities. Additionally, outdoor cats may benefit from having long nails, because they use these nails to climb trees and escape possible predators.

Indoor cats, however, do not need long nails and often are less active. While some cats are content to keep their nails worn down by scratching on a scratching post, other cats may want to sharpen their nails on your furniture, carpet, or other items.

Trimming your indoor cat's nails regularly (every two to four weeks) can help minimize damage to your home. If possible, it is best to start routine nail trims when they are kittens, as this will help with compliance as they age.

Older cats may need help with nail trims, because they tend to be less active and may be less inclined to use a scratching post. In these cats, trimming nails not only protects your furniture and home, but also helps prevent your cat's nails from becoming overgrown. In severe cases, a cat's nails can become so long that they curve around and grow into the paw pads, causing an infection. Regular nail trims can help prevent this from occurring.

What type of nail clippers should I use for my cat?

Pet nail clippers come in several varieties. Guillotine style clippers have a hole that the nail is fed through. Once the nail is positioned in this hole, you squeeze the handles together and a blade rises up from the base to cut the nail. Scissors-style nail clippers are shaped like scissors, with two moving blades that come together when you squeeze the clipper handles together. Either of these clippers can be safely used with cats. In fact, you can even use human nail clippers on cats, although it is best to have separate clippers for cat and human use, to minimize the risk of spreading infection.

You may need to experiment with several clipper styles to find the one that works best for you. Many people prefer small, scissors-style clippers that are designed specifically for cats.

How should I restrain my cat for her nail trim?

When restraining cats, you will likely discover that "less is more". Your cat may happily lay on your lap or a cat bed for a nail trim, especially if you have an assistant who can pet her while you are trimming the nails. This is especially likely if you introduced nail trimming from an early age, in a positive manner. If your cat is less receptive to having her feet handled or her nails trimmed, you may need to have an assistant hold her for you.

Place your cat on an elevated surface, such as on a counter or table. It may take a bit of trial and error, but most cats can be held with some gentle snuggling pressure over the shoulders. Some cats may feel more comfortable if they are wrapped in a fluffy blanket or towel for this step.

If your cat resists restraint, stop trimming and contact your veterinarian for help trimming your cat's nails or an in-person demonstration of safe restraint techniques. Your veterinarian may also prescribe calming medication to make the procedure less stressful for your cat.

How do I safely trim my cat's nails?

First, take your cat's paw in your non-dominant hand and press the middle paw pad between your thumb and forefinger. This will extend your cat's nails, so you can see what you are doing.

Next, place the clipper on the nail at the point where you wish to cut. If your cat has white nails, you should be able to see the quick; your goal is to cut not too closely to the quick. If your cat has dark nails and you cannot see the quick, aim to cut at the point where the nail curves or hooks downward.

Position the clipper blades so that pressure is applied from top to bottom and not from side to side, to help minimize splintering of the nail.

Close the clippers to make your first cut. Check the nail closely after trimming and repeat if necessary. It is better to make several small cuts, taking the nail gradually shorter each time, than it is to accidentally cut off too much during an overzealous first attempt.

What should I do if I accidentally hit the quick and my cat's nail bleeds?

Despite your best efforts, you may occasionally hit the quick when trimming nails. Hopefully, you are making small cuts and you only cut the very tip of the quick, resulting in minimal discomfort and just a small drop of blood. If this happens, you can apply a small amount of styptic powder (available at any pet supply store) to the end of your cat's nail to stop the bleeding. If you do not have any styptic powder, use flour or cornstarch.

Is there a way to make this process more pleasant for my cat?

With some training, your cat can learn to tolerate or even enjoy nail trims. Your goal is to make this process as pleasant for your cat as possible. As discussed, ensure you apply the minimal amount of restraint necessary to accomplish the nail trim. Many cats resent restraint more than the nail trim, so you may be surprised at how smoothly things can go with minimal restraint.

Give your cat small treats frequently throughout the process. Give a small treat after you finish clipping the nails on each paw to help your cat develop a positive association with nail trims.

Finally, do not rush. Go at your cat's pace. If your cat loathes restraint and nail trims, do not set a goal of clipping all your cat's nails in one sitting. If the nails truly need to be clipped immediately, take your cat to a veterinarian or groomer, then start working on at-home nail trims after the initial nail trim is done. After that, begin the process of gradually acclimating your cat to nail trims.

When you attempt to trim your cat's nails, only do what she will permit. That may mean you spend the first day simply working up to being able to handle your cat's feet, using a lot of praise and treats. Once your cat will comfortably allow her feet to be handled, you can try clipping one nail and then immediately offering a treat.

In the following days, aim to work up to two nails, three nails, and eventually clipping one entire paw in a sitting. It may take several weeks to build up to performing a full nail trim and that is perfectly normal and acceptable. The goal is to make nail trims as positive and stress-free as possible for your cat. Taking the time to desensitize your cat to handling and nail trims will pay off in the long run, by making all your cat's future nail trims more pleasant.