

# How to Trim a Dog's Nails at Home

## How often should I trim my dog's nails?

Most dogs need to have their nails trimmed approximately once a month. Dogs that are frequently walked on pavement or concrete may be able to go longer between nail trims, because walking on a hard, rough surface can help file the nail. Dogs that are inactive or do not spend any time on hard surfaces may need nail trims more frequently, such as every three weeks.

The best way to determine whether your dog is due for a nail trim is to closely examine your dog's nails. Get down and look to see whether your dog's nails touch the ground. If they do, they are too long and should be trimmed. If you can hear your dog's nails clicking on your hard floors when they walk, this is also a clear indicator that the nails are too long.

Having your pet's nails trimmed by a groomer is certainly an option. Vet clinics also do nail trims and can offer sedation if your dog is very upset by the procedure. Many dogs can be trained to accept nail trims at home though, and with some experience, you can become comfortable cutting their nails. If possible, it is best to start routine nail trims when they are puppies, as this will help with compliance as they age.

## What type of nail clippers are the best for dogs?

There are two main varieties of dog nail clippers: guillotine style and scissor style. 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.

You may need to experiment with several clipper styles to find the one that works best for you. Both styles of nail clippers are effective for dogs, although many people develop a preference for one style.

## How do I safely trim my dog's nails?

In most cases, it is easier to trim your dog's nails if you have someone help by restraining your dog. Keeping your dog still and minimizing wiggles will reduce the likelihood of accidentally cutting a nail too short and damaging the quick.

First, take your dog's paw in your hand and examine the nails. If your dog has light-colored nails, you should be able to see the quick. Your goal is to cut approximately 2–3 mm away from the quick, to avoid causing your dog pain. If your dog has dark nails and you cannot see the quick, trim just the very tip off the nail.

Through a series of small clips, removing 1–2 mm of nail with each clip, you can gradually cut the nail to a shorter length without damaging the quick. Aim to make your final cut at or near the point where the nail begins to curve, but stop sooner if you encounter the quick. In some dogs, especially those who have not received regular nail trims, the quick may be grown out almost to the end of the nail.

If your dog has dewclaws (smaller nails on the inside of the paw), do not forget to trim them. Dewclaws do not contact the ground, so they often become overgrown and can even curve around until they grow into the paw pad.

### **What should I do if I accidentally hit the quick and my dog'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 dog's nail to stop the bleeding. If you do not have any styptic powder, you can use flour or cornstarch.

### **How can I make nail trims less stressful for my dog?**

While it is perfectly natural for dogs to resist having their feet handled, most dogs can be trained to tolerate and even enjoy nail trims. In most cases, the way to a dog's heart is through his stomach. Giving your dog treats during nail trims can help make the experience more pleasant for both you and your dog.

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If you have a helper holding your dog, they can also give small, frequent treats throughout the nail trim. In some cases, you can convince your dog to stand still by simply smearing a small amount of peanut butter on a wall or door while you trim. If needed, your veterinarian may be able to prescribe a mild sedative to relax your dog for the nail trims.

Finally, go at your dog's pace. If your dog hates nail trims and you want to overcome that hatred, do not set a goal of clipping all your dog's nails in one sitting. If the nails truly need to be clipped immediately, take your dog 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 dog to nail trims.

On the first day, you might use treats and praise to work up to the goal of simply being able to touch your dog's feet without them panicking. Once you can easily handle their feet, use treats to build up to trimming just one nail. Continue trimming one nail at a sitting until your dog seems calm with that approach, then gradually work up to trimming two or three nails at a time, then an entire paw at one time. After several weeks of consistent daily effort, you should reach a point where your dog will allow you to complete an entire nail trim in one sitting.

Although this approach may seem time-consuming, it will save you time in the long run. After a month or two of consistent daily effort, your dog's nail trims should remain relatively easy and low stress for the rest of your dog's life. For further information on training a dog to accept nail trims, see the handouts "Successful nail trims: Training for Happy Handling" and "Taking the Stress Out of Nail Trimming for Dogs".

### **Can I use a file or grinder on my dog's nails?**

Some people prefer to forego clipping their dog's nails and instead use a handheld file or grinder (Dremel) to wear away the end of the nail. There are several advantages associated with this method. First, it will leave the end of your dog's nail smooth, eliminating sharp edges. There is also less risk of damaging your dog's quick with this method. Additionally, some dogs that have an aversion to clipping are more tolerant of nail grinding.

However, nail grinding is not without risks. The spinning file can easily become entangled in hair, so it is important to use caution when grinding the nails of a long-haired dog. If the file slips and contacts the dog's skin, it can also cause a severe skin burn. Finally, the dust created by nail grinding can be irritating to people (and presumably dogs), so it may be best to do this outside.

If you choose to grind your dog's nails instead of clipping them, be prepared to gradually acclimate your dog to the process, just as you would acclimate them to nail trims. Start small, just clipping one or two nails with frequent food rewards, and gradually build your dog's tolerance over time.