

Your Smart Dog

How To Trim Nails (and Like It!)

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I've not met any dog or any person who *loves* trimming nails. I think sometimes nail trims are as traumatic for the people as for the dogs. I've met several people who tell me horror stories about what they have to go through to trim their dog's nails: everything from sitting on their dog to actually sedating the dog. That's not good for the vet, the dog, or for you. **With a little patience and some work, you can teach your dog to remain calm and cooperative for nail trims.** And yes, you can face nail trims with a lot less stress, as well.

WHAT IS A DOG NAIL, ANYWAY?

Dog's have four toes on each foot, each toe has a nail.

(There may also be a fifth toenail on the inside of each front leg, called a dew claw.) Dog

Nail cross section



nails are much like human finger- and toe-nails. The nails grow out and don't have any nerve endings, therefore are painless to cut. Each nail grows from a nail bed, this part is alive, has nerve endings, and a blood supply. This living tissue of

the nail bed is called the quick. If you trim the nail back far enough to hit the quick, your dog will feel pain and will bleed. It can be difficult to determine where the quick begins, particularly if your dog has dark nails.

WHAT TOOLS TO USE

There are several types of nail cutting devices on the market. **I prefer a grinding tool because it eliminates the possibility that I can hit the quick** – which makes nail trimming less stressful *for me*, and therefore less stressful for my dog. I use an electric Dremel® tool with a rough sandpaper drum. There are plenty of options, go online or to a home supply warehouse and take a look at all your choices before you buy.

PLEASE TRIM MY NAILS!

Before introducing the grinder to your dog, you must first teach your dog that it's fun (ok, at least bearable) to have his feet handled. Start by filling a bowl with really delicious treats such as hot dogs, cheese, or lunch meat cut into pea-sized bits. Following are the steps, in order, to help your dog like nail trims:

- Sit on the floor with your dog and simply touch his foot and immediately offer a treat from the bowl. (At this point, you're only touching the foot with your hand, not lifting or holding the foot.)
- Once your dog is completely at ease with this step, you can begin gently picking up the foot. No squeezing or actually holding the foot, just pick it up and immediately offer a really good morsel.
- Hold the foot for two seconds before releasing the foot and feeding a treat.

It's much better to go slow than it is to rush through the steps.

- Hold the foot for four seconds before releasing and feeding a treat.
- Hold the foot firmly for one second. (Because you're now hold the foot more firmly, drop the time way back until the dog is used to this new piece.)
- Hold the foot firmly for three seconds before releasing and feeding a treat.
- Introduce the Dremel® to the dog. The tool is *not on* for this step. Just let the dog see it, sniff it, and then feed the dog a treat.
- With the tool behind your back, turn it on it's lowest setting and feed the dog for two seconds. Turn the tool off and stop feeding the dog. Repeat this step until the dog looks happy to hear the tool turn on.
- With the tool still behind your back, turn the tool on and touch the dog's foot *with your hand* (not with the tool). Feed a delicious treat immediately and turn the tool off.
- With the tool *in sight*, turn it on and feed your dog. Turn the tool off and stop feeding your dog.
- With the tool *in sight*, turn it on and touch your dog's foot *with your hand*.



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- With the tool *in sight*, turn it on and hold your dog's foot firmly *with your hand*.
- With the tool *off*, touch the tool to your dog's nail briefly.
- With the tool *off*, hold the tool to your dog's nail for two seconds.
- With the tool *on it's lowest setting*, briefly touch the dog's nail. Turn the tool off and immediately treat and end the session.

This isn't about force, it's about getting your dog comfortable with having his feet handled.

Before proceeding from one step to the next, make absolutely sure your dog is enjoying the current step. It's much better to go slow than it is to rush through these steps. **This isn't a race, it's a confidence- and trust-building exercise.** This is the order of the steps – don't skip steps and don't rush through them.

As these exercises progress, you may have to up the value of the treats. For instance, when I started with step 1, I was using hot dogs as the treat. However, I had switched to grilled salmon when I got to step 8. It's important to never rush or force your dog to comply. If he wants to pull his foot away, let him. *Go at your dog's pace, not your pace.*

HELPFUL TIPS

Always give your dog a delicious food reward after each success. This isn't the time to be stingy – the more good treats your dog gets during this process, the more he'll look forward to the next session.

Keep your sessions short. I worked through each of these steps over the course of three or four weeks, always letting my dog set the pace. I worked for only five minutes at a time, always ending before I saw any stress signals from my dog.

Once your dog accepts nail trims, it's ok to work on one nail at a time – you don't have to grind all the nails in one sitting. Generally, I'll grind one or two nails per sitting.

If your dog tries to pull his paw away, let him. This isn't about force, it's about getting your dog comfortable with having his feet handled. You can't force a dog to like nail trims! Just like your dentist can't force you to like a root canal.

Make sure the process is rewarding and stress-free for you, too. When I introduced the Dremel to Nemo, I kept the sessions short *for me*. I promised myself that I could stop after just three or four minutes, even if Nemo was enjoying the process. I also rewarded myself for working with Nemo – maybe it was a walk, or maybe it was a piece of chocolate. Either way, I made sure it was worth it *to me* to practice with my dog.

You owe it to your dog (and yourself!) to teach him that nail trims aren't something to fear. Your dog will thank you and so will your vet or groomer!

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