



Taking the Stress out of Nail Trimming for Dogs

Of all the tasks performed by veterinary healthcare professionals, trimming nails is one of the least favorite ones. Dogs don't enjoy nail trimming either so here are a few ways to make trimming nails less stressful for both dogs and humans.

How do I prevent my dog from developing a fear of nail trimming?

It's best to begin dog training early in life. In addition to "sit" and "stay," pups can learn to relax when their nails are trimmed. When petting your new pup, rub her feet and put pressure on her toes. Let her investigate the nail clippers as they lie on the floor, then open and close them so she can hear the noise they make. Next, clip the very tip off a nail while providing positive reinforcement with praise and treats. Your pup should not develop a fear of the clippers if exposed to them in a positive manner at a young age.



My dog is already scared of having her nails trimmed. Is it too late?

Although it's easier to teach a pup, old dogs can "learn new tricks." Be prepared to spend extra time training your older dog to tolerate nail trims because the steps outlined above for puppies aren't quite enough for older dogs that already have a paw aversion. Adult dogs may be fearful of the clippers and the sound they make, especially if they had a previous bad experience (having the nail trimmed too short or "quicked").

Desensitizing older dogs to nail trimming takes patience. The process cannot be rushed. Monitor your dog's response as you follow these steps and repeat steps if your dog has difficulty along the way.

How can I help my dog so we can have successful, non-stressful nail trims?



1. **Get your dog accustomed to seeing nail clippers.** Remember that this mechanical tool may be new to your dog or may be associated with past trauma. Either way,

she has to resolve this fear of the clippers. Summon your dog and pick up the clippers in her presence. Act happy when you grab the clippers and give your dog a treat. Repeat this step several times a day for a couple of weeks. Your dog should quickly learn to associate the sight of the clippers with praise and treats. When she gets excited to see the clippers, move to step 2.

2. **Train your dog to allow paw handling.** When your dog is relaxed, lightly touch her shoulder and work your way down to her paw. Use a soothing voice to keep her calm as you gently rub her paws. Then focus on the toes, giving each one a soft squeeze. Next apply gentle pressure to the nail itself. If your dog becomes scared or pulls back her paw, stop for a bit and continue only when she settles down. Treats may supplement verbal rewards but are not a substitute for them. Withhold both when the dog retracts her paw, but don't scold her. Repeat this process several times a day.
3. Now, back to the clippers. **Acquaint your dog to the sound of the clippers** by repeating step one with this addition—open and close the clippers as you talk to your dog and offer a treat. Gradually decrease the space between dog and clippers without touching the dog with the device. When she is eager to hear the sound of the clippers and accepts the praise/treat, you are ready for the next step.
4. **Combine paw handling with the clippers.** The goal here is to prepare your dog to tolerate the touch of the clippers. As in step 2, sit on the floor with your dog relaxed. Handle her paw with one hand and open/close the clippers with the other hand then place them on the floor. Repeat the process gradually moving the clippers closer to your dog each time. If your dog stays relaxed in close proximity to the clippers, gently touch the clippers to one toe while talking in a soothing voice. Add a treat if you need to. If your dog stays relaxed, touch each toe with the clippers. If she becomes anxious or retracts her foot, take a break. Wait a while and try again with a gentler touch.
5. **Tackle the nail trim.** Once your dog stays calm while you hold her paw, make the clipper noise, and touch the clippers to her foot, you are ready to tackle the actual nail trim. Hold her paw and gently grasp a single toe. Trim the very tip of the nail. Don't trim too much off at first so you avoid exposing the quick. Reward your dog with praise and a treat after trimming each nail. Don't insist on completing all 4 feet in a single session. Many dogs do better if trimming is divided into smaller increments. Aim to trim one or two nails followed by a break.
6. **Sharpen the clipper blades** regularly. Dull blades can mean painful trimming.

With patience and persistence, most dogs learn to accept and even look forward to nail trimming; however, if your dog shows signs of extreme fear or anxiety such as trembling, excessive drooling, panting, growling or snapping, it's best to consult a healthcare professional. Pushing the issue could amplify your dog's fears and make the situation worse.

Also, avoid scolding your pet if she pulls her paw back or exhibits fear. Punishment may suppress her resistance to nail trimming, but may serve to increase the dog's fear which won't solve the problem in the long run. The goal is to desensitize the dog to nail trimming as you note her level of tolerance and avoid exceeding that threshold.

Following these steps and offering rewards and praise instead of reprimands will put a positive spin on a dreaded task. This will help make nail trimming a more pleasant experience for both you and your dog.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Lynn Buzhardt, DVM

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