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Trimming Your Pet's Nails At Home

Nail trimming is useful for most species, whether it is for health reasons or to simply make that pet more comfortable to interact with. Long nails can interfere with proper motion, lead to painful broken nails, or become embedded into surrounding tissues.

Overgrowth of nails interferes with placement of the foot on the ground, cage surface or perch, putting stress on the toes and other structures and making movement awkward and possibly painful. This is particularly important in older pets who do not naturally wear nails down as well as when they were young.

Long nails are more prone to breaking, becoming caught on carpeting and other surfaces. If the break occurs high enough on the nail it can be quite painful and lead to infection of the nail bed and bone. Overgrown nails can curl around to imbed into the soft tissues, causing excruciating pain and infection. Dew claws or extra toes are more prone to this malady, as they are not worn down with normal movements. It is more likely to overlook this problem in older pets or those with long hair obscuring the nail bed area.

Anatomy of the nail:

The toenail or claw grows out of the last bone in the toe. While the outer horny layer does not have sensation, the outer connective tissues at the base of the nail and the inner "quick" extending part way down the nail does. The quick contains the blood and nerve supply for the upper portion of the nail, and is the area to be avoided during a nail trimming procedure. When viewing a lightly pigmented nail from the side, the quick forms a visible pink triangular shape inside the base of the nail. Darkly pigmented nails prevent us from visualizing this area, however its position can be estimated if there are quicks visible on other lighter nails, to use as a gauge.

The fore feet nails in dogs and cats typically are longer and the quick extends down further into the nail, than in the rear toes. Keep this in mind when using quick on another toe to determine how much to remove from a pigmented nail. Another way to tell if you are getting close to the quick, is to observe that the cut surface of the nail turns from dry and crumbly, to smooth and waxy as you near the blood supply. You may notice a central white area appearing in the waxy portion as well. When you reach this point it is time to stop trimming.

Training of dogs and cats:

To accustom your friend to nail trimming, regularly handle and stroke the feet, gently touching each toe in turn. Use a combination of firmness and reward with a calm approach. Use rewards as much as possible, doing something really fun at the end of a difficult task. Food treats, petting, praising, or just plain being silly help to lighten the mood after doing a difficult maneuver and can be an effective reward for the happy go lucky pet.

Make the training sessions short if this is difficult for either of you. **End on a positive note, with you in charge.** If all you can accomplish is that your pet has held still for one second with you holding the paw, you have ended with the right tone. Do not stop with the pet in charge, unless it would be dangerous or harmful to continue, as this gives a clear message that being naughty is a useful behavior.

You may need to enlist another person or the skills of a professional to accomplish this task. Unfortunately, some pets never adjust to having their nails trimmed. In fact, there are some very sweet pets that require sedation or full anesthesia simply to trim the nails! But have heart, this is the exception, not the rule.

Tools:

- **Toe nail clippers** - The small and large toe nail clippers made for people fingers and toes work quite effectively for birds, small mammals and reptiles, as well as for cats. To avoid splitting the nail when cutting a side to side flattened nail, such as found on a cat, it helps to place the blades parallel to the flattened sides of the nails.
- **Scissors type** - This style is only useful for small nails, such as found on cats. The blades are not extremely sharp and due to the small size, they simply cannot cut through the heavier nails. The small size, however, can be an advantage when working around small toes.
- **Safety nail trimmer** - This is a medium weight scissors type trimmer which is equipped with a safety stop near the cutting blade to limit the amount of nail trimmed. It also has a spring to automatically push the handles back open. The blades are not extremely sharp and thus not as effective as other types.
- **Guillotine trimmer** - This tool has an oval shaped ring into which the nail is inserted, with the top of the dog's nail positioned away from the cutting blade. This provides support along the top and sides of the nail when the handle is squeezed to push the blade through the nail from the underside. For exact positioning, it helps to have the movable blade positioned above the supporting frame, nearest you, so that you can see it. This type of trimmer can be used for all but the tiniest of species and has been a popular style. Rescoe is a common brand name. Replacement cutting blades are available.

- **Heavy-duty nail clippers** - This type of trimmer is now the most popular with veterinary staffs. The style is midway between a heavy scissors type trimmer, and wire cutters. They are powerful and sharp, which makes them especially effective for larger nails. It is important to place this type carefully on the nail, as they are strong enough to cut through bone if accidentally mal-positioned.
- **Electric nail trimmer** - Spinning drum type files, such as the Dremel brand, are another option. Some dogs tolerate this tool better than other implements. Safety glasses are a good idea when using this tool.
- **Nail files** - The heavy style used for people are effective for smoothing rough nails and for completing the entire nail shortening for those pets who do not cooperate with other tools.
- **Styptic powder** - Powders to stop bleeding are important to have on hand. Kwik-stop is one such brand. In an emergency, flour or corn starch, as well as direct pressure for 5 minutes can be utilized to stop bleeding. In small animals such as birds, it is imperative to call for assistance if you cannot stop bleeding immediately, as their total blood volume is small.

Tips & Tricks for nail trimming:

Trimming the nails after they have been softened during a bath often reduces the discomfort of the nail trim for the pet. This is especially true for dogs. It seems that the compression of the rigid nail during nail trimming is a source of discomfort for some.

Some pets react with pain even if the nail does not bleed when trimmed. *It may be that the nerve descends down beyond the blood supply in some nails or that compression of the nail is the source of pain.* In some pets the reaction may be more fear than pain based, but give your friend the benefit of the doubt, and see if you can modify your approach to make the process more comfortable.

Overgrown nails often develop a blood supply that extends further into the nail, i.e., it will often not be possible to trim an overgrown nail to normal length with the first nail trimming. (The exception here seems to be with cats, where the quick does not shift in position.) Weekly to every other week nail trimming can help restore the nail to its previous state. Some have very long “quicks” that do not respond to this method and a decision will need to be made with your veterinarian how to address this problem.

Use caution when using a relatively large or powerful trimmer. Make note of where you have positioned the trimmer on the nail and verify that the other nails, toes and the pad of the toe being groomed are not in the cutting plane. This is especially important with wiggling pets; it is better to regroup and try again, than to inadvertently amputate a wanted body part!

Remember that it is not easy to safely trim the nails of all pets at home, but that it is an important part of your pet’s care. Call your veterinarian, should you have questions, need and demonstration, or other assistance. **Good luck and have fun with your friend!**