



HAPPY FEET

OVERGROWN NAILS CAN CAUSE INJURY AND ILLNESS: LEARN HOW TO KEEP YOUR PET'S TOES IN TIP-TOP TRIM // BY RUTHANNE JOHNSON // ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETE COBURN

WHEN THE ADORABLE toy poodle came into the vet clinic, his toes were swollen from his overgrown nails constantly snagging on upholstery. His owners were angry with the dog for damaging their furniture, says Will Mangham, a consulting veterinarian with the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association (an HSUS affiliate). “I said, ‘Well, you’re damaging your dog’s feet.’”

A simple nail trim solved the problem—and, lesson learned, the family began bringing the dog in regularly for a mani/pedi.

Dog and cat claws grow continuously. But unlike their wild cousins, pets spend much of their time on carpeted floors and soft grass that usually don’t wear down their nails enough to keep them short and safe. Besides causing household damage and potential injury to people, being long-in-claw can be painful. Mangham recalls treating a dog whose nails had grown back around into the pads of his paws. It must have felt like walking on glass, he says. Treatment included cutting the nails, bandaging his wounds and giving antibiotics. If Mangham hadn’t seen the dog when he did, the wounds could have led to bone infection and required toe amputation.

Even less extreme cases can cause an abnormal gait and stumbling, making walking and playing difficult. Injured ligaments and

tendons and even broken toes can result when nails catch and pets instinctively try to pull free. In older pets, overly long nails can lead to bad posture and even arthritis.

“It’s a downward spiral to poor health that starts with something as simple as nail care,” says KC Theisen, HSUS director of pet care issues.

SET UP A HOME SALON DE PET

Since your pet can’t clip his own nails, it’s up to you to keep them tidy. Vets and groomers typically offer trimming services. But not all pets enjoy car rides or accept handling by strangers. For do-it-yourselfers, Mangham suggests first observing a trained expert. Theisen learned from her dog’s groomer. “She showed me the proper technique and how to work with the dog’s feet gently and to use lots of treats and praise to help my dog settle down.”

How often nails need trimming depends on natural wear and how quickly they grow. Your dog’s front nails may need a trim every 10 days; slower-growing back nails may need it every two or three weeks. Cat’s nails should be checked every two weeks, particularly those of less active kitties. Regularly walked dogs and

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cats who make use of scratching posts typically need fewer trims.

Signs of overgrown nails include louder clicking sounds on the floor, nails that extend below the pad when you lift and observe the paw in profile, and toes being pushed upward while your pet is standing.

Before you start snipping, you need the right tools. The most commonly used clippers come in scissors- and guillotine-style. Whichever style you choose, make sure the blade is sharp, Theisen advises. “If the tool is sticking or not making a clean cut, it’s time to replace the clipper.” Because her Labrador retriever’s hard, thick nails were dulling blades every three to four clipping sessions, Theisen switched to a motorized rotary filer—“basically a power sanding tool.” The humming, heat and vibration meant a little more training to get Guinness used to the process, but a careful three-second touch per nail leaves a nicely blunted tip.

Other tools to have ready are treat rewards and a styptic stick or powder to stanch bleeding in case you cut a nail’s internal blood vessel, called the quick. A towel on your lap can help prevent scratches if your pet braces against you.

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

Training and desensitizing your pet are also vital for good trimming sessions. No pet starts out liking nail trims, Theisen says. “They use their nails to groom and hunt, for traction when running and playing, and for self-defense. When you interfere with their claws, they’re going to be nervous.”

To help her first dog, Jessica, become comfortable with having her paws handled, Theisen started with practice sessions a couple of times a week. “Sometimes, I’d trim her nails. Other times, I’d just sit and hold her feet and check her nails and manipulate them a little bit.” To train Guinness with the rotary grinder, she let it run on the table beside her, turning it on and off and then rewarding him with treats.

Creating a relaxing scene for each session also helps, says Mangham. “So just sitting watching TV and your pet is in your lap or on the couch right next to you. Have some treats there and the clippers right next to you.” Let your pet sniff the clippers and feel their touch. Lay them beside you while offering a treat or belly rub. Mangham uses these motivators with his rescued Havanese, Emma. “I can cut all of her nails front and back. ... The whole time I’m petting her belly and talking to her and her tail is wagging. When we’re done, she rolls over and gets her treat. It’s the easiest thing ever.”

SNIP TIPS

- ◆ Regular trim sessions can help prevent cutting the quick, which grows out with—but slightly behind—the nail tip.
- ◆ Gently splay the toes apart and push on the pad to extend your pet’s nail.
- ◆ Cut each nail at a 45-degree angle. Keep cuts shallow and conservative to avoid the quick. Trim only when there’s 1/8-1/4 inch of growth past the quick, or cut just the tip if it has a sharp point.
- ◆ In dark nails, the quick can be hard to see. If you see a grayish color in the center of the nail bottom, the quick is near and you should stop trimming.



▶ **FIND MORE** nail trimming tips at humanesociety.org/allanimals.

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