

The Toenail Trim

Cutting your dog's toenails doesn't have to be a dramatic event. But it is important to know how to trim his nails safely and which are the best tools for the job.



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Illustrations by Michael A Simmons MFA

The most common reasons for avoiding nail trims are that the owner is afraid of “quicking” the dog, or that the dog fusses and creates bad feelings around the procedure. Nail cutting becomes an event surrounded by angst and drama. For very active dogs who run all day long on varied surfaces, cutting nails may not be necessary. High mileage wears them down naturally (*Photo: normal toenails*). But among city or suburban dogs who are lucky to get a mile or two walk daily, excessively long toenails are more common than not.

So what's the big deal? The first consequence of long toenails is painful feet. When a dog's toenails contact hard ground, like a sidewalk or your kitchen floor, the hard surface pushes the nail back up into the nail bed. This either puts pressure on all the toe joints or forces the toe to twist to the side. Either way, those toes become very sore, even arthritic. When the slightest touch is painful to your dog, he will fuss when you pick up his paw to cut nails.

The second consequence of long toenails is more serious. All animals rely on information from nerves in their feet to move through the world and process gravity accurately. For millions of years, wild dogs have run long distances while hunting and worn their nails short. The only time their toenails would touch the ground was when climbing a hill. So a dog's brain is evolutionarily

programmed to associate toenail contact with being on a hill, and he shifts his body posture accordingly: leaning forward over his forelimbs, up the imaginary hill as reported by his toes. Since the hill is not real, a secondary compensation with his hind limbs is necessary to avoid a face plant. This abnormal compensatory posture can be called “goat on a rock,” because it brings his paws closer together under his body.

Normal neutral posture is a nice show dog “stack,” with vertical legs like a table. Recent research shows that standing with limbs “camped-in” is hard work to maintain. These goat-on-a-rock dogs get over-used muscles and eventually over-used joints, especially in their hind limbs, making it difficult to jump in cars, climb stairs and even hard to get up from lying down. Sounds like a lot of older dogs we know! Cutting toenails short can be like a miracle cure for your dog whose hind end has become painful, weak and over-used.

That's the “why.” Now for the “what and how.” Toe nail maintenance requires a trim every two weeks, just like maintaining human fingernails. If you can hear nails clicking on your kitchen floor, they are much too long. But don't despair, the technique shown here will make short work of getting your dog's nails back to their correct shape. The concept is easy: trim around, never across the quick, which is actually your dog's finger (*Figure 1*).



Normal toenails float well above the pad when weight bearing.

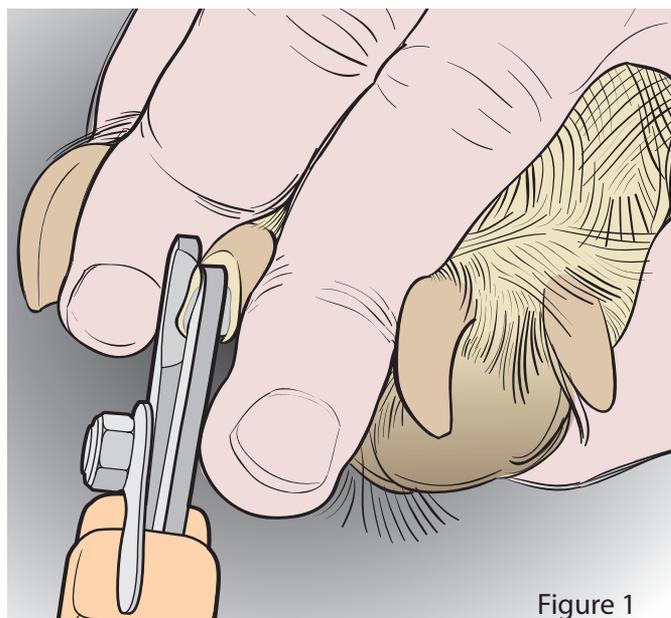


Figure 1

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

NAIL CLIPPERS

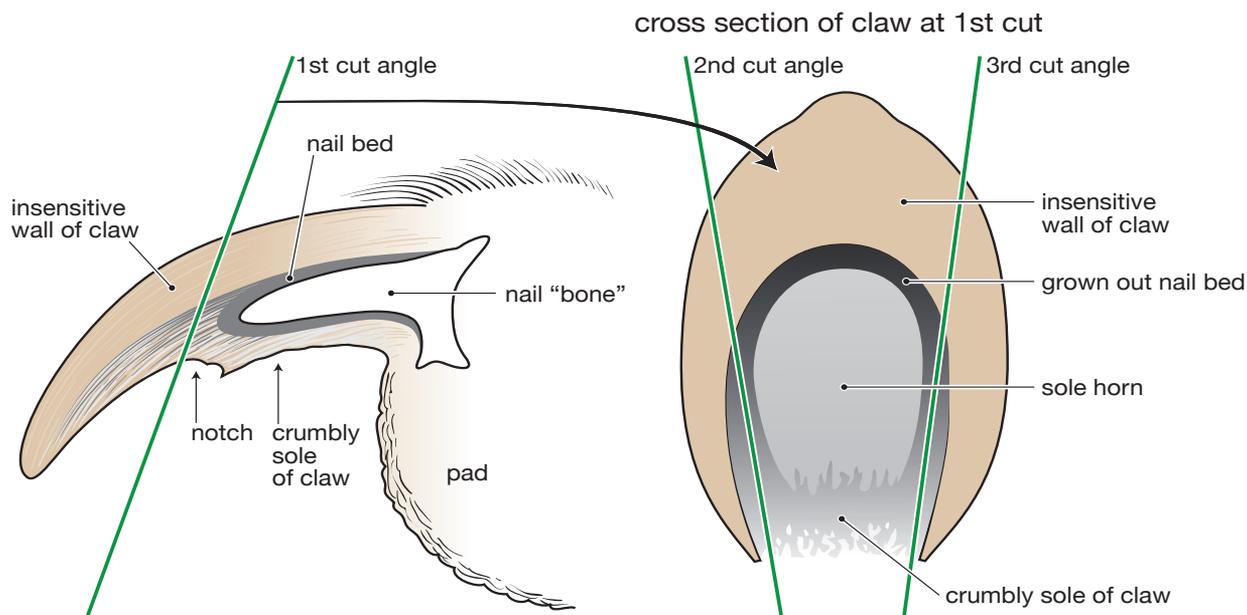
- ❑ Use only “scissor” type clippers. Guillotine style clippers crush the toe, which is painful. Never put the whole nail in a clipper.
- ❑ Use small size clippers for better control. Only giant breed dogs will need large ones.
- ❑ Keep your tools sharp: either replace or sharpen your clippers regularly.
- ❑ “Quick-guards” obscure your view of the nail. If possible, remove them, or at least tape them back so that they won’t interfere with your work.
- ❑ “Pedi-paws” type grinder: Smooth out your trim afterwards with a rotating emeryboard.
- ❑ File only the insensitive nail around the top and sides of the quick: “Sharpen the pencil” where the nail is the wood and the quick is the lead (*page 18*).

IF YOU CUT THE QUICK

- ❑ Use corn starch to staunch the bleeding if you make a nail leak. With shallow cuts, this will be rare.
- ❑ It’s easiest if you use a small container with tightly packed powder.

TIPS AND TRICKS

- ❑ Trim nails outside or in a well lit room.
- ❑ If you need “cheaters” for reading, use them for toenail clipping too.
- ❑ It’s actually easier to see the nail structures on pigmented nails than on white ones. The insensitive nail will show as a chalky ring around the sensitive quick.
- ❑ Keep clipper blades almost parallel to the nail - never cut across the finger.
- ❑ Don’t squeeze the toes - that hurts! Use your fingers to separate the toes for clipping and hold the paw gently. Use a pair of blunt edged children’s scissors to remove excess toe hair: nothing dulls clippers quicker than cutting hair!
- ❑ Remember, no dog ever died from a quicked toenail. If you “quick” your dog accidentally, give a yummy treat right away.
- ❑ Make nail trimming fun: always associate nail cutting with cookies and praise.
- ❑ For maintenance, cut every two weeks. To shorten, cut every week.



Once the insensitive nail is thinned out and isn't supporting the quick, the quick will dry up and recede. This will allow you to cut your dog's nails even shorter. Each dog's nails are different, but very long toenails often become dry and cracked, with a clear separation of the living tissue and the insensitive nail. This will make it easier to trim back longer nails. Use the techniques illustrated on page 19.

What's inside your dog's toenail? (image above) On the left, the interior structures are shown, along with the suggested angle to remove the "roof" of the nail, while not harming the sensitive quick. On a black claw, the interface between sensitive and insensitive nail is usually chalky and white - very easy to discern. On the right is a close-up view of the inside of the nail. On cross section, the sensitive quick will look translucent and glossy, like

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living flesh. In untrimmed claws, there will often be a “notch” below the tip of the quick. It is usually safe to initiate your angled cut at the notch.

Cut the “roof” at an angle

Always hold your clippers oblique to the length of the nail. Remember, the nail is thicker on top, so you can safely make a shallow cut. Be conservative on that first cut until you know your dog’s nails - some have very thin walls. Watch for the glossy tip of the finger; they will usually let you know when you are close.

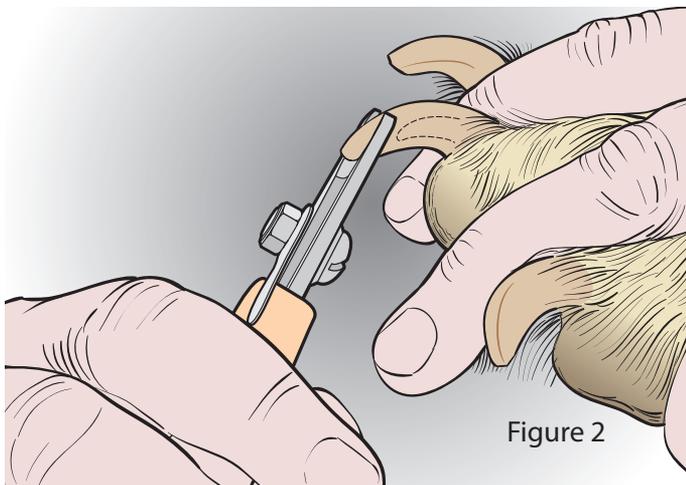


Figure 2

Cut the sides

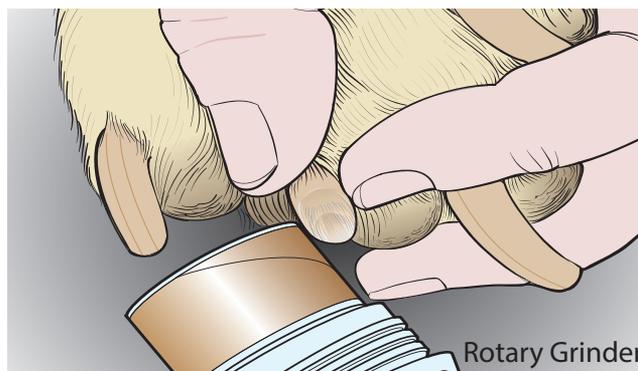
The first angled cut will leave an edge you can use for your side cuts. Remember to still keep the clippers at a shallow angle to the length of the claw. After the three primary cuts, you should have a much shorter, blunt looking nail, with crumbly material sticking out on the bottom. You can brush that away with your own fingernail. Check for sensitivity on the exposed end. Ideally, you should be close enough to the quick that they don’t like being poked there. If not, repeat steps one and two until you are close. In most dogs, the nails will be off the ground when standing.

“Sharpen the pencil” with the rotary grinder or an emery board.

Every manicure has to have a smooth finish. Using the rotary grinder, smooth out the insensitive wall around the quick, like sharpening a pencil, where the quick is the lead and the wall is the wood. Some dogs don’t like the grinder - you can use an emery board.

Always start with very shallow cuts, with the clipper nearly parallel to the part of the nail you are cutting (Figure 2). In some dogs, the sensitive tissue is very near the surface and in others, further away. Using this method, it is possible to expose, but not cut, the sensitive inner finger - the quick. Once you become skilled, the worst you will get is a tiny leak or ooze of blood. Keep the corn starch nearby in case of accidents. It’s important to have a nice finish to your work. An inexpensive rotary grinder is perfect for this because the motor is too weak to cause any harm. Take off the “guard” so you can see what you are doing.

Some dogs act like cutting their nails is their worst nightmare. This may be a learned behavior from their painful, overstimulated toes, which will slowly dissipate along with the pain once the nails are short. Use all your best restraint and behavior modification tricks to get through the initial phase, whether your dog is



Rotary Grinder

a squirmer or a drama queen. Start on the hind feet, because the nails tend to be a little shorter and less sensitive than the front. But remember you can’t make an accurate cut on a moving target so get help from your dog trainer or groomer if needed. Make nail trimming “quality time” you spend with your dog. Lots of kisses, lots of treats and a positive attitude go a long way. If you dread it, your dog will too, so learn how to be a good actor until you succeed in believing it can be a loving experience for you both. If your dog loses patience quickly, try cutting one nail a day. As long as you keep the order of toes consistent, this will be a good maintenance schedule, giving every toe a trim every 16 days.

Short toenails are critical to your dog’s health and soundness. Failure is not an option! 🐾

Thanks to holistic vet Dr Judith M Shoemaker for teaching this method to lucky colleagues and dog owners around the world.

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