



# TRAINING YOUR PET TO TOLERATE NAIL TRIMMING

Some dogs and cats resent having their paws held or their nails trimmed. This intolerance is partly instinctive in young animals, and may also be learned from an unpleasant experience during nail trimming.

The living portion of the nail bed contains sensitive nerves and blood vessels. If toenails are cut too short, a dog or cat learns that nail trimming is painful. This negative experience is not easily forgotten. Once a pet has learned to anticipate discomfort when its feet are touched, its evasive reaction can intensify each time. Most cats rarely need to have their claws cut if they use a scratch post. If a cat is destructive or aggressive with its claws and either fails to respond to retraining or you cannot retrain it, declawing may be an alternative. For the dog who enjoys regular outdoor activity, nail trimming may not be needed. In many cases, walking on pavement maintains a dog's nails at an acceptable length.

## Training Tips

If your pet is instinctively cautious about having its feet touched, and even if it shows no sign of withdrawing its paw, teach your pet that this interaction is not unpleasant.

- Before you ever attempt to trim your pet's nails, begin by touching its legs, feet, and toes, and associate this with an activity it enjoys. When it is resting, begin petting it, gently passing your hands over its back and legs. If this is well tolerated, you may wish to give it a small food treat. Do not try to do too much the first time.
- Gradually manipulate your pet's foot more each time. Eventually, you should be able to slip your fingers in between each toe, gently squeezing each one to flex the nail, putting gentle pressure as you hold each foot and manipulate the leg. Do not attempt this exercise when your pet is in an agitated or playful state, as it is most likely to resent any restriction to its movement.
- Once your pet tolerates having its feet touched during quiet times, you may begin to incorpo-

rate this into elements of play time. Train your dog to assume a "down/stay" position when it retrieves a ball, for example, and "shake" its paw before continuing the game.

## Trimming Tips

If you are unsure of how to trim your pet's toenails, ask your veterinarian or a technician to show you how. They can show you where the sensitive nerves and blood vessels are likely to be found. The nail bed is seen as a pinkish triangle at the base of the nail; however, it may not be evident in dark-colored nails.

There is more variety between the shape of toe nails in dogs than in cats. Some pets' nails grow in a more curved shape, as compared with those growing more parallel to the ground. This may determine how short they may be trimmed. Even a skilled professional can misjudge the depth to which a nail may be trimmed. It is also not uncommon for a pet to withdraw a foot while the nail is being clipped, because of pressure on sensitive nail areas.

It is better to cut less than to cut more than necessary! Trim off small sections at a time and stop well short of the sensitive part of the nail. Cutting the nail too short results in a painful experience for your pet. Cut your pet's nails frequently, a little at a time, rather than occasionally when toe nails are uncomfortable to both your pet and to you. In this way, nail trimming will become a routine event, rather than a periodic wrestling match. Continue to manipulate your pet's feet and toes between nail trims so that it remains a familiar sensation.

## Problem Pedicures

If your dog or cat has already had an unpleasant experience with nail trimming, you can train it to tolerate it by starting from the beginning. Even if you have followed the preliminary training steps above, start over as if its feet had never been conditioned to manipulation and gradually desensitize your pet to this interaction once again. Your veterinarian may recommend a small dose of a mild anti-anxiety medication to facilitate retraining in extreme cases.

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If your pet overreacts to nail trimming at the veterinarian's office during its annual examination and vaccination, you may wish to schedule a separate appointment for nail trimming. In some cases, a dog or cat's reaction to nail trimming is so

extreme that retraining is difficult and may not be worthwhile. For these unhappy pets, nail trimming is best avoided. When it cannot be avoided, however, your veterinarian can safely do a pedicure on a sedated or anesthetized pet.