



Regular nail trimming is essential to help prevent nail overgrowth. Here are some tips for helping prepare your dog for low-stress nail trimming!

Nail Trimming

Your dog's nails should be trimmed often enough so that their nails do not touch the ground when standing. The growth rate of nails differs for every dog, so monitor your dog's nail length to determine when you should trim them. Generally it is recommended that nails are trimmed every 2-3 weeks.

Long nails can cause issues for your dog, such as:

- Decreased grip on surfaces.
- Nails can grow and curl into your dog's skin or paw pads, causing infection and pain.
- Increased risk of nails getting caught on objects, causing nail damage or a tear.

When trimming, it is important not to trim the nail too short. You need to avoid clipping the nerve endings and blood supply to the nail. This is referred to as the "quick" of the nail. It is easier to see the quick in clear nails, than in dark nails. Therefore, go slow when trimming and try to cut the nail at a 45-degree angle.

Tools

There are a few different tools you can use to trim your dog's nails.

Nail Clippers

There are different styles of nail clippers available for dogs. A scissors-style clipper is generally easier for small dogs. Make sure the size of the clippers is appropriate for your dog.



When using nail clippers, try to trim small pieces of nail off more frequently rather than large pieces of the nail, less often. This helps you avoid cutting the nail quick. Before each use, check that the clippers are sharp. They may need to be resharpened or replaced if they have become dull.

Dremel or Nail Grinder

Some people prefer to use a Dremel or nail grinder, as it creates a smoother nail surface. This reduces the chances of your dog's nail getting caught and damaged on something. It is also a good alternative for dogs who are fearful of nail clippers – some dogs dislike the sensation and/or sound of the nail clippers. It can also help you trim closer to the nail quick, without hitting it.

When choosing a Dremel, consider the speed, size, and noise of the device. Some dogs will be less fearful of a quieter Dremel – having an adjustable speed also helps.



When using the Dremel, Fear Free Happy Homes recommends that you, “hold the grinder close to the rotating head and stabilize it on your finger or hand to minimize any potential discomfort from the grinder’s vibration. Grind a nail for only a few seconds at a time then remove the grinder. If left in contact with the nail for too long, the grinder can get hot and be uncomfortable for the animal.”

Caution: Before grinding your dog’s nails, it is important to trim the fur on your dog’s paws. This prevents the fur from getting caught in the Dremel, which can cause significant pain and stress.

Stationing

Before you start to teach your dog how to have their nail’s trimmed, it’s helpful to teach them to sit or lay down on a non-slip surface. This will prevent your dog from slipping during a nail trim, to ensure safety and reduce stress.

Find a mat – this can be something like a bathmat, yoga mat, or carpet. Place it on the ground in a quiet area of your home.

Steps:

- 1) Start by encouraging your dog to explore the mat – dropping some treats on the mat can help.
- 2) As soon as your dog steps onto the mat, verbally praise and give your dog a treat!
- 3) Continue this until your dog is willingly stepping all paws onto the mat.
- 4) Encourage your dog to sit or lay down on the mat – and again, verbally reward with treats!
- 5) After a while, you can start to introduce a cue word. For example, as your dog walks onto the mat, say “on your mat” at the same time. Repeat this and reward. With repetition, your dog will associate your cue “on your mat” – or whichever cue you choose – with going to their mat.

When you start to introduce different tools (e.g. nail clippers or a grooming brush) to your dog, always do so with your dog on their mat. This will ensure they are on a stable surface (slipping makes dogs anxious!) and your dog will learn to associate the mat with a positive training experience.

Setting the Stage

After you have taught the “stationing” behaviour, then you can start to introduce the nail trimming tools to your dog. Bring out the nail clippers or Dremel and place them on your dog’s mat. Reward your dog with treats and allow them to sniff or investigate the tools.

Playing calm, classical in music in the background or using calming pheromones, such as an Adaptil® diffuser can also help promote relaxation. Gather some high value treats that your dog prefers – tasty treats will increase your dog’s motivation to participate.



Steps

Once your dog is comfortable with the tools on their mat, then you can start to gradually guild towards trimming your dog's nails. Here are some steps from [Fear Free Happy Homes](#):

1. Increase proximity of the tools to your dog's nails:
 - a. Very gradually bring the tool close to your pet. Give a treat. If your dog shows any sign of fear, increase the distance of the tool from your dog.
2. Sound of clipping or grinding a nail:
 - a. Clip a piece of dry pasta near your pet's nail to simulate the sound of a nail being clipped. Give a treat. If using a grinder, turn the grinder on several feet away from the pet at first and feed treats. Gradually move it closer to him as he remains calm. Feed treats. Repeat.
3. Sensation of a nail being touched:
 - a. Starting first up high on the pet's shoulder or hip, gradually glide your touch down a leg and to a paw and nail. Give a treat. Repeat several times.
4. Sensation of a toe being gently squeezed:
 - a. Again, starting at the pet's shoulder/hip, glide your hand down and handle your pet's paws and nails while feeding treats. Progress to gently squeezing a toe to isolate the pet's nail for clipping. Give a treat. Repeat several times.
5. The feel of the clippers/grinder against a nail:
 - a. Again, starting at the pet's shoulder/hip, glide gently down the leg to the foot and touch the clippers to the pet's nail. Give a treat. Repeat several times. Introduce the vibration of a grinding tool against the pet's foot without actually grinding a nail. Give a treat. Repeat several times.
6. Sensation of a nail being clipped or ground down:
 - a. Finally, if your pet is comfortable with all previous steps, try clipping one nail (or grinding for just a second or two). Immediately feed a treat afterwards. Proceed only if your pet is not showing signs of stress and feed a treat after each clipped or ground nail.

What to AVOID

Here are some things to avoid when teaching your dog how to have their nails trimmed:

- Forcing your dog to have their nails trimmed. This can result in your dog having an escalated defensive reaction, such as snapping or biting. It will also reduce your dog's willingness to participate in future.
- Punishing your dog for "saying no" (e.g. walking away) or showing signs of stress. This is your dog's **ONLY** way of communicating their discomfort. Punishing stress behaviours (e.g. lip licking, growling, avoiding contact) may cause your dog to not show warning signs in future, significantly increasing a bite risk.
- Not rewarding your dog for basic attempts. Reward for all desirable behaviour – would you work if you didn't get paid? Pay your dog with treats!



- Teaching nail trimming with distractions or when your dog is stressed. Always seek a quiet, low-distraction environment to start teaching these basic exercises. This will help your dog focus, reduce any anxiety and stress, and increase training success.

Safety

If your dog shows signs of aggression or you are worried about trimming your dog's nails, seek assistance from your veterinarian. They can perform a nail trim for you on a regular basis. Taking your dog to a groomer who uses low-stress handling and positive reinforcement can also help trim your dog's nails.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to muzzle train your dog. Wearing a muzzle ensures that everyone can stay safe during a nail trim. In the meantime, you can still use behavioural modification to train your dog how to accept low-stress nail trims while they wear a muzzle. See our [EHS Muzzle Training](#) resource for more details.

Additional Resources

The Training Academy at the Edmonton Humane Society offers private consultations for dogs. Our certified dog trainers can help you with nail trimming using reward-based training. For more information, visit our website: <https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/what-we-do/education-training/dog-training/privateconsultations/>

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behaviour questions by emailing:
askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).