

NAIL TRIMS: TRIMMING AWAY THE TERROR

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Nail trims are a common source of stress for pets and owners alike, but there are many things you can do to set yourself and your pet up for success with at-home nail care.

BEFORE YOU START

- Be sure your pet has a nonslip surface such as a towel, rug, or yoga mat to stand on. Slippery floors or unstable surfaces are stressful for animals.
- Use calming scents such as lavender or chamomile if you have them. Better still, use calming pheromones such as Adaptil for dogs or Feliway for cats.
- Play soft, calming music in the background, such as classical, species-specific, soft rock, or reggae.
- Have a good supply of your pet's favorite pea-sized, soft, delicious treats ready to go.

THE PROCESS

Nail trim problems often stem from trying to do too much at once and overwhelming the pet, you, or both! Breaking down the nail trim process into several components and working on each one individually, makes for faster and more pleasant progress. The following steps should be considered separate in the process of introducing your pet to nail trims. **Only progress to the next step if your pet is comfortable with the previous step** and is not showing signs of stress such as licking lips, tucked tail, pinned ears, looking away, leaning away/pulling foot away, trembling, struggling, etc. Each pet will progress at a different pace, so take things slowly and watch your pet carefully.

Accustom your pet to:

1. The environment:

Take pet to the nonslip surface and allow him to be in the position of his choice (standing, sitting, or lying down). Give a treat.

2. Sight of the nail trimming tool:

Place the nail clippers, grinder, or file on the ground and let the pet investigate or sniff it. Give a treat. Bring the tool close to your pet. Give a treat.

3. Sound of clipping or grinding a nail:

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.

4. Sensation of a nail being touched:

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.

5. Sensation of a toe being gently squeezed:

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.

6. The feel of the clippers/grinder against a nail:

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.

7. Sensation of a nail being clipped or ground down:

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.



THE EQUIPMENT

There are pros and cons to each type of nail trim tool: clippers, nail grinders, etc. Sometimes a particular tool that's been used in the past causes a pet so much stress that it's easier to "start over" with a new tool (such as switching from nail clippers to a nail grinder or vice versa). Here are some helpful things to keep in mind.

Nail clipper tips:

- Use very sharp clippers – this means replacing or sharpening them regularly. Dull clippers can cause pain as the nail gets squeezed.
- Trim small pieces of nail off more frequently rather than large chunks of nail less frequently. Remove small slivers of nail at a time by "shaving" or whittling the nails.
- Stick to trimming the thinner, pointy outer part of the nail rather than the thick nail bed.
- Be careful not to trim too close to the quick (the blood supply of the nail) as this is painful. Taking small slivers off will help you with this.

Nail grinder tips:

- Hold the grinder closer to the rotating head and stabilize it on your finger or hand to minimize any potential discomfort from the grinder's vibration.
- Buy a quieter or adjustable speed nail grinder to help the pet get used to the sound and sensation of the tool more easily.
- 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.
- Gently hold back paw hair with a hand or with clips so it doesn't get caught in the grinder.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

- Don't rush the process. Even after you have completed all the steps, don't feel compelled to trim all nails in one sitting. If you trim only one nail per sitting, that is a huge step.
- If your pet shows moderate to severe signs of stress with nail trims, or you are unable to make progress despite taking things slowly and using high-value treats, consider consulting with one or more of the following:
 - A Fear Free Certified Animal Trainer or other certified positive reinforcement trainer or certified animal behaviorist
 - A Fear Free Certified Veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist who could prescribe a calming medication to give your pet before nail trims
 - A Fear Free Certified Groomer

