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On Their Toes

Can a few simple tips take some of the anxiety out of this most dreaded grooming task?

I trim my three dogs' nails once a week, taking the tiniest bit off each nail. Each dog lies down, choosing to face me or not. It wasn't always like this.

My first very own dog, adopted as a college graduation present to myself, required sedated nail trims at the vet's office her whole life.

If I can learn to do nails, you can too!

WHY IT'S SO HARD

Deb Jones, Ph.D., is a retired psychologist, longtime dog trainer and handler, author of [HELP! I CAN'T DO MY DOG'S NAILS!](#) *A comprehensive guide to*

nail trims without trauma, and instructor for a similar online class. She explains that we tell people they need to keep dogs' nails short without explaining how to do it safely based on nail anatomy. She says, "We just don't give people enough information to do it properly."

Dogs' nails feature a hard outer layer. Underneath that is a chalky layer. Inside that and wrapping around the toe bone is the nail's blood supply, called the quick.

"It's very traumatic for some people, especially once you make a mistake and you 'quick' the dog," she says, referring to accidentally cutting into that blood supply, which hurts and bleeds a lot.

Dogs scream. It looks like a murder scene. People feel terrible. Things spiral into negative loops of fear, anxiety, and stress for both species.

"This is one of those cases of what we call 'one-trial learning,'" Jones says. "When we teach them something, it usually takes repetition after repetition after repetition. But, when something bad happens, something painful and scary and unpleasant, it only takes one time, and that becomes a permanent memory. So, there's not a lot of room for error."

For that reason, many want pros to trim their dog's nails, but depending on



Hare Feet versus Cat Feet

An old rule claims that dogs' nails shouldn't make noise on hard floors. That's impossible for many dog breeds with flatter and more flexible hare paws, where even super short nails hit the ground. Only those with compact, cat like paw structures, such as Dobermans or Rhodesian Ridgebacks, have nails that won't touch the ground when short enough.

attitudes and methods, pros might make things worse. Even one bad experience forcing a dog to comply can undo the trust of puppies well-socialized by breeders to paw care.

"It can spiral out of control pretty quick," Jones says, with groomers refusing to do it or veterinary teams requiring dogs be sedated.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Basically, dog lovers try to do too much no matter how the dog is feeling. "If your dog is constantly stressed or anxious or avoidant or frustrated or whatever, it's never going to get better. We have to go back to the place where everybody is comfortable," Jones says.

She teaches many steps—starting with the eight stages of teaching dogs "hands are good" through "hands lifting paws are good," before moving onto eight more stages of introducing tools, and even more steps before bringing an isolated nail and tool together.

People also assume success with one nail or one paw means success with all the others. Jones recommends treating each paw, each toe, as an individual that requires all the trust-building steps.

In addition, people don't give enough food rewards or believe they can phase them out, rather than continuing to

reward the dog after each action. Note: It's a mistake to provide food the entire time as a distraction. That can backfire and cause dogs to be suspicious when offered food rewards in the future. Also, don't ask your dog to perform tricks like shake for them to give you a paw. It creates emotional conflict.

People often keep trying when things go poorly. That's a big no-no. Jones evokes a 24-hour rule: If it isn't going well, simply stop, give your dog treats as thanks for the info, and try again another day.

"We're lucky, really, with dogs," Jones says, "because they tolerate an

awful lot. They do. They put up with a lot from us. If you work with any other species, you find out very quickly that you don't have any leeway for tolerance. If they don't like something, you will likely get hurt if you don't listen to them and back off quickly. With dogs we somehow have this idea, which is a misconception, that they should let us do, physically, whatever we want to do to them, whatever we need to do to them to take care of them."

WHAT TOOL TO USE

It depends on the dog. After going through the trust-building process and



GOOD GROOMING

learning about the noises and sensations of different tools, some dogs don't mind the pressure and snap of nail clippers. They work especially well on young puppies' nails. Other dogs, including mine, much prefer a nail grinder. Grinders are less likely to cause bleeding, but they get hot and can tangle in dogs' coats. However, they require less visual acuity for people with close-up vision issues. Some dogs accept a nail file better, even though it takes longer, so you have options if sharp clippers cause you stress.

And, many dogs—especially those already traumatized—feel much happier learning to use a scratch board or half-pipe to wear down their nails on abrasive paper. It's approached like teaching a trick.

If you use a tool, though, don't

Think Pain Before Training

Whether just starting to learn to do dogs' nails or suddenly seeing a setback, always explore pain issues with your veterinarian before resuming trust building. Paws are complicated bone and soft-tissue structures, so even dogs without nail-trim trauma may be sensitive about their feet or feeling unrecognized pain.

cut nails straight across. It's too risky. Because of how the quick grows longer with the nail and needs to recede over

time with small, frequent nail trims, Jones explains it's much better to take a tiny bit off each side of the nail, then a tiny bit from the top/front. Think about working around the quick without endangering it.

HOW TO BUY TIME

Because scary-long nails need attention, consider a sedated nail trim by your veterinary team to buy time to work through the process needed to do them yourself. It may take months of short, frequent sessions to build your dog's trust, but it's absolutely doable. **FD**

Roxanne Hawn is a journalist and an award-winning dog blogger. She is the author of Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate.



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