

Trimming Your Puppy's Nails

Begin trimming your puppy's nails right away.

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Most owners dread trimming their pup's nails. It looks difficult and, well, puppies are so wiggly! The truth is, nail trimming isn't difficult if you know how. The first piece of advice is this: Begin early. Don't wait until your puppy is 6 months old to trim his nails. Begin trimming the first week it comes home, even if there isn't much to trim, and trim the nails weekly to get the pup accustomed to this routine.

Several types of nail trimmers are on the market, available at pet-supply stores. Some are better suited to small breeds; others are made with large breeds in mind. Guillotine trimmers (one blade) are better for small breeds because they are small and easy to use on tiny paws. Clippers with two cutting edges are better suited for large breeds. They are larger than guillotine trimmers and are made more like hedge clippers, giving plenty of leverage for large, tough nails. However, in skilled hands either trimmer can be used on any size dog; it's a matter of preference.

Puppy toenails are sometimes soft and extremely small, which makes trimming with regular-sized canine toenail trimmers difficult. The adult-sized trimmers can tear the nail instead of clipping it. Human fingernail trimmers are helpful, especially on small breeds, such as Toy Poodles or Yorkshire Terriers. Ask your veterinarian to recommend an appropriate size and style for your puppy.

When you purchase nail trimmers, also buy styptic powder. Styptic powder is a coagulant that will stop the bleeding if you accidentally trim your pup's nails too short and nick the quick, the vein inside the nail. How do you know where the quick is? It's easiest to determine in pups with light nails; the quick appears as the pink line down the center of the nail. Cut right below the pink line.

Dark nails are more difficult, but a rule of thumb is to cut right below where the nail starts to curve. Trim a little at a time to avoid cutting the quick. Be aware that as a nail grows, so does the quick, so frequent nail clipping means the quick stays short and out of the way. To trim your puppy's nails, hold a paw firmly in one hand. (It will help to hold your pup close to your body with that arm.) Place your thumb on top of the foot and fingers underneath to spread the toes. With the nail clippers in the other hand, snip the nails one at a time with short, decisive strokes. Clip right where the nail starts to curve; the quick usually hasn't grown past that. If it has, the nail will bleed when cut, but don't panic (though puppy may be unhappy because cutting the quick hurts). Simply use your finger to apply a pinch of styptic powder to the end of the nail and apply pressure. Hold for 30 seconds or until the bleeding stops.

Once you have trimmed each nail, file the nails with an emery board to remove sharp edges. Normal canine nails should be intact all the way into the foot, not bleeding, cracked or split. Without doubt, your puppy will wiggle, whine, even yelp when you trim its nails. Don't be alarmed by these antics. Talk quietly and soothingly, and hold your puppy firmly. Praise your puppy lavishly when the job is done, and give him a treat. You want the puppy to remember each nail trimming as a positive, fun experience!

Next Step: Clean Ears