

Ask A Vet: Toenail Trimming Tips

Sunday, October 25, 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I absolutely dread trimming my dog's toenails! Every time I get the trimmers out he runs and hides and when we finally catch him it turns into an all out brawl. Is there anything we can do to make this experience more manageable?

-Mrs. Nail Nipper

Dear Mrs. Nail Nipper,

Rest assured you are not alone – it's a common fear among dogs. Fear of nail trims can be severe and intensify over time, making the experience stressful for the dog, the owner, the groomer and veterinarian. The best way to avoid this fear is to teach your dog as a puppy that nail trims aren't scary, but are associated with good things like lots of treats! This process is a time to use high value treats – peanut butter, hot dogs, etc – something he can't resist!

If your dog has a bad experience with the clippers you have used previously, start over and get a new pair of clippers in a different style, or even a Dremel-type file. The biggest tool for desensitization is to reward your dog when he is relaxed with treats! When you get out the new trimmers, start feeding your dog treats ASAP. When you put the trimmers away, stop the treats. Do this repeatedly so your dog learns that clippers = treats.

Next, you will desensitize your dog to allow his feet to be touched without stress. Start slowly – touch the shoulder and reward the dog for staying relaxed. Keep going down the leg until you touch the paw, paw pads, and eventually the nails and apply pressure to the nails to simulate the nail trimmers. Reward a relaxed response at each step. Once it is easy to touch his nails, use other objects to touch the toe nails (pen, cotton swab, note card, etc) and once he is accustomed to this, use the clippers and tap the nails without clipping. If he is still calm, place the clippers over the nail but do not clip – do this for each nail and follow with a reward. Next, get the dog used to the sound of the clippers – squeeze the clippers or start the mechanical file and reward with treats. Stop the treats when the sound stops.

Lastly, hold the paw and squeeze the clippers close to the paw but not touching it. Reward a relaxed response. After relaxation at this step, you are ready to clip the nails. Do one nail at a time and take a break between nails. You can do more nails at once as he becomes comfortable.

If at any point of this process your dog becomes uncomfortable, take a break and go back a few steps and slowly progress forward. Doing just a little bit of homework and training with your dog can go a long way to alleviate your dog's fear of toenail trims! Consult your local veterinarian about what will work best to make toenail trims a more manageable experience.

-Dr. Ashley Vander Wey