

PODCAST EPISODE 3 - Zen and the art of nail trimming; stress-free tips (and clips!)

Hello everyone, and welcome to episode three of the Pet Wellness Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Mike, and today's topic is what I've wanted to talk about for nearly three decades. And guess what? Today is that day. I am so pumped!

Today's episode is all about trimming your pet's nails and how you can turn this very frightening event into something your pet can tolerate. Now, if you notice, I didn't say enjoy. I used the word tolerate because I firmly believe that most people don't realize how much fear and stress trimming a pet's nails can have on them. For those of you who don't know this about me, I'm a certified fear-free practitioner, which in a nutshell, is a style of practice that alleviates a pet's fear anxiety and stress. Number one on the priority list. And because of this, before we get into the How, When, Where and Why behind the actual nail trim process, I want to share what nail trims mean from your dog or cat's point of view.

As a person, we might be thinking, 'Hey, I cut my nails all the time and it doesn't hurt. What's the big deal when my cat or dog gets their nails trimmed?' Well, what's interesting is it has very little to do with the actual cutting of the nails. It has more to do with the fact that their paws are being held without their consent. Just imagine for a moment how you would feel if a total stranger grasped your hand or worse, your foot without any verbal explanation. Well, that's exactly how your pet feels when your groomer or veterinarian or veterinary technician touches their feet. We don't like to think of it that way, but we should.

It's more than that, even for people who are not strangers. Have you ever shaken the hand of a colleague, or a friend and they hung on longer than you want them to? I know I have. Well, that's the feeling our pets have. When we hold onto their paws long enough to trim their nails, it's really invading their personal space for longer than necessary. At least it is in their mind. Finally, what about the fact that when our pets get their nails trimmed, they almost always have them all done at one time? If we did one nail, they'd probably just brush it off. But all 18 nails are a whole different ballgame.

Imagine if you were afraid of snakes, which, frankly, most of us are. The best way to reduce a person's fear of snakes is to introduce one snake slowly from very

far away and gradually move closer and closer until the person gets accustomed to it. Well, in my mind, grabbing all your pets 4 feet and trimming all their paws all at one time is essentially like putting you in a small room with 20 snakes. In the world of psychology, that's called "flooding". And there is absolute scientific proof that flooding never works, and in fact, it only really increases fear and anxiety over time.

Having your pet's feet held for as long as we must trim all their nails is a classic example of flooding in my mind. And if a stranger is doing it, even worse. Here's another interesting example. Think about it. Why are there so many adults who are afraid of a two-second poke to get blood done? We even laugh about it ourselves. It's nothing. It's a simple little poke, but it really stems back to memories of our childhood. We didn't understand back then why a stranger was grabbing our arm, putting a tight string around it, and then sticking us with this painful device. And for what? We didn't understand why they were doing that, in the same light.

Our pets have no idea why a stranger is invading their personal space by holding on to their feet, making this weird clicking sound with a scary object that they've never seen before, and sometimes making it hurt. Do you see the similarities? I certainly do. I remember having the same experience with my daughter when she was younger and how horrible I felt when I had to hold her tightly for every blood draw. But then one day I took her to Sick Kids to have an endoscopy procedure done. And I remember the horror I felt when the nurse said that she was going to have to put in an intravenous catheter, which is much more of a poke than just taking blood. I offered to help, but she said she was fine. I thought to myself, 'Yeah, right.' Well, anyway, I sat outside the room and listened to this kind, empathetic nurse tell my daughter a story about the catheter. And miraculously, she got it in with next to no trouble.

Having our pet's nails trim needs to change from a very fear and anxiety-inducing procedure into something much less fearful. And today I'm going to share that formula with you. The 'How'. But before we get there, I just want to first talk about the fact that when you get your pet's nails trimmed, you fall into one of four camps or categories. First, there's those that can trim their own pets' nails and can do it without stress on either yourself or your pet. You know what? This probably accounts for 1% of pet owners. And for those of you listening who fall into this camp, I really hope this podcast will give you a few extra tips that will make nail trims even better. But I will say pat yourselves on the back because you either have

a very tolerant and well-behaved pet or you've learned to perform fear-free nail trims that I'm going to describe in a moment.

The other 99% of people fall into the other three camps. There are those of you who trim your pet's nails at home, but it's a true struggle for the trimmer and the trimmee. Sometimes there's blood involved. It's usually not from the pet! And I really hope that you guys benefit from what I'm going to illustrate next. Then there are some of you that take your pets to a groomer, and your pet gets their nails trimmed there while they're being groomed. That totally makes sense. And finally, you have your pet's nails trimmed at the vet clinic, either with their annual vaccines and checkup or at another time because you're done doing it at home.

The problem with the groomer/vet approach is that you're not present to see how your pet reacts to the nail trim. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't take your pet somewhere to have their nails trimmed. But if you're going to leave your pet for a potentially scary procedure like a nail trim, perhaps you can take additional steps to make that moment a lot less frightening for your pet. We'll talk about that very shortly.

Okay, let's start with the question of why we should trim our pet's nails. In humans, nails are more about form than function. Yes, nails do have a purpose for people. They protect the tips of our fingers, and they can be used for important scratching behaviours; like alleviating an itch, those addictive scratch and win cards, and if you're a rebel, dragging them down a chalkboard. For dogs and cats who are quadrupeds, meaning they walk on all fours, their nails are designed for much more important uses. In dogs, they help with maneuvering, traction, and stability when they're walking and running. They can be used for digging, something we all love our dogs to do. And finally, they can be used like humans to protect and to scratch an itchy spot. Cats use their nails in the same way as dogs but also use their nails to climb and get away from predators, or to defend themselves in situations where they can't get away; like when you're holding them for a nail trim.

While we're on the topic of how important cat's nails are, I want to bring up the topic of declawing, something that I did routinely in my first 15 or so years in practice, and I'm honestly ashamed of. I've vowed many years ago never to do it again. And I plead with anyone listening who may own a kitten to never get their

pet declawed. It is a cruel and completely unnecessary surgery. In September 2021, Saskatchewan, by the way, became the 8th province to ban declawing. I'm embarrassed to say that Ontario and Quebec are the only two provinces left in Canada that haven't banned this brutal surgery, which means that you can still get your cat declawed in Ontario.

So back to the reason, 'Why'. As pets get older, their nails tend to grow faster, usually because they don't wear them down as fast because they tend to walk less than younger pets. They also get harder and more brittle with age, making them prone to crack, which can be very painful. So, nail trimming really helps keep them short so that they don't crack on the pavement and split. Plus, it's much harder for dogs and cats to maneuver, get traction or climb with long nails, which makes a nail trim so important. The worst scenario that occurs when nails are not trimmed regularly, I've seen once in a small dog and way too often in senior cats, is that their claws can turn around and dig right into their pads! Imagine walking with your nail digging into the skin of your foot. It's excruciatingly painful. And I've had to anesthetize cats to dig their nails out of their paws. So please, whatever method you adopt for nail trimming, just make sure that it happens at least three to four times a year and more often when your pet gets into their senior years. That's the 'When', by the way.

Now on to the moment of truth, the 'How'. Here's my fear-free formula for nail trims. It's entirely based on a principle that I talked about briefly in my last podcast, and we'll be talking about for years to come, a process called systematic desensitization. It's the principle of taking very small steps towards a difficult procedure and rewarding each step of the way. Let's recap what difficulties dogs and cats have with nail trims.

First, there's the environment. Having something scary done to you is even worse in a strange environment, like a vet clinic or a grooming salon, than in a place that the pet is naturally comforted by, like their home. Second is the sound of the nail clipper. That's quite foreign to a dog or a cat, and it's scary. Unfamiliar sounds of any kind can be anxiety-provoking to people and animals. You remember that music and Jaws just before the shark attacks? It's almost as scary as when you see the shark. Ok, yes, that's why I became a vet. Cats and dogs hate having their feet held, but especially without warrant, and by a total stranger. Their feet are not only their sacred personal space, but they are one of their key defence mechanisms,

especially in cats. Let's just agree that dogs and cats hate having their feet touched, never mind being held for a period.

And finally, fourth, whether you're a beginner nail trimmer or a seasoned pro, hitting the quick, which is the name given, by the way, to the nerve running down into the nail is extremely painful and is bound to happen to every single pet at least once in their lifetime. And I don't think I need to tell you how fear and anxiety-provoking pain can be. So, we must desensitize our pet to the first three things. Pain, unfortunately, is a little harder to desensitize to. However, taking care of the first three problems will make hitting the quick and causing pain much less common. So how do we desensitize to the environment? Well, there are two options. First, trim their nails at home. That's probably the ideal option. And second, would be to try and desensitize them to the clinic or the grooming salon. You will, of course, need to speak to the groomer or your veterinarian about this, but essentially, it's taking them into the grooming salon or the vet clinic periodically and either you or a staff member at the facility reward them for calm behaviour. And the reward can be anything your pet likes. It can be a treat, it can be verbal praise, or it can be touch. Your pet just must enjoy going there so that when they do go in there for that nail trim, they're already starting off at a way better level than if you didn't desensitize them to that environment. So, what about desensitizing them to the clipper? Ideally, you want to purchase a clipper that's very similar to the one that your veterinarian or groomer uses. All you must do is call them up and ask and they can help you find one. And then once you have the clipper, here's what I want you to do. I want you to sit at home for five minutes, two to three times a week and just reward your pet with treats or praise or whatever they like when they react positively to the following steps. Number one is just showing them the clipper. You need to just reward them when they act calmly when they see the clipper. Once they're cool with seeing the clipper, the next step is to close the clipper; making that clicking sound. And believe it or not, that is quite scary for most dogs and cats. That's probably going to be the time where you must do it slowly. Every time your pet shows any fear, anxiety or stress during this entire procedure, you've just got to take a step backward to the step before and introduce that step more gradually. Next, you want to move the clipper towards the foot area and reward calm behaviour. Then you want to touch the clipper to the foot and reward calm behaviour. And finally touching the clipper on the foot while making that clicking sound. In no time, you're going to be doing a lot of things around your dog's feet with a clipper, and they're not going to care one

little bit. Which is where we want to get to before we move on to the final step, which is desensitizing your pet to having their foot handled. I guarantee that this is probably going to be the most challenging step for you, especially if your dog or cat is already Defcon five for touch! You may have to start with just moving your hand towards their paw and rewarding calm behaviour. Then it's crucial that you take baby steps once you get to touch the paw. Keep this in mind. The scarier the event, the longer it will take to reduce the fear associated with it. And what I mean by that is if your dog or cat bites people when their feet are touched, it may take you months before you'll be able to hold their paw for any length of time. The word that will save your pet from heartache is patience, which I realize in our time is hard. But if you care enough about your pet, trust me, you'll find it. Speaking of patience, if you've elected to trim your pet's nails at home, which is the ideal environment for your pet, I want to suggest that you don't trim all 18 nails at once. My suggestion is to trim one, maybe two, and then throw a two-minute, 'Give me my favourite treats' party, and walk away. After all, what's the rush? Your pet has 18 claws, and there are 365 days in a year. I realize that it may be more convenient to do all of them at once, but it's much easier for your pet to start in small increments. And if you're lucky, your pet will tolerate the experience to the point where you can do one or maybe two paws at a time. But please don't rush it. The systematic desensitization approach that I just outlined works the best and the fastest on very young pets like puppies and kittens. And for those of you listening that have a puppy or a kitten, all you must do is follow these steps and you'll have an adult dog or cat that will gladly pass you their foot for a nail trim. Unfortunately, the more sensitive your cat or dog is to the noise of a clipper or having their feet touched, the more patience and time you're going to need to spend. And some of you may be saying, I just don't have that time or worse, my pet is so bad I can't even get started, and I appreciate that. And that's where the added use of natural anxiety remedies or potentially anti-anxiety drugs can lend some assistance.

Natural anxiety remedies are usually given orally, and they're great because they work at alleviating anxiety without changing your pet. In other words, your pet won't be sedated like they would be, say with a drug. And these natural remedies have very little, if any, side effects. The only real negative is they take a bit of time to work. They can take up to 30 days, which I don't see as a problem. You just must give it some time. But they're a nice and safe solution for mild and moderate anxiety in your dog or cat. Examples include theanine, tryptophan, ashwagandha, milk, protein hydrolysate. There are a lot of them, and all you must

do is talk to your veterinarian about which one is best for your pet. I like to combine those oral natural anxiety remedies with pheromones given either as a diffuser or as a spray to help with extra support, especially at home. If your pet's anxiety about nail trims is bad, then you may have to resort to drugs in which case you're going to need the supervision of a veterinarian. There are some great antianxiety drugs for pets like gabapentin for cats or trazadone for dogs, that really do help them. The only real negative side effect is that they cause sedation. And finally, in situations where nail trims lead to severe aggression in dogs and cats, there's injectable anesthetics. And the ones I like to use are reversible which means that your pet can go home as awake as when they came in. At the end of the day, there are options out there. All you must do is talk to your veterinarian about what those options are for your pet.

So, we've almost come to the end of the podcast, and I know what you're thinking. 'Okay, you've told me all these great things on how I can reduce anxiety in my pet about nail trims, but we haven't talked about how to trim the nails.' Well, to be honest, that process isn't that tough especially because your pet is not going to be struggling when you hold their foot and so their foot is going to be still and much easier to trim. You just need to avoid the area called the quick. And I'm going to include an image in the show notes that I used on Instagram that will show you exactly where to trim and where not to trim.

I really hope that my tips today will allow your pet to experience a much less anxiety-provoking nail trim. If you make an important procedure like nail trimming more enjoyable for your pet, you will both reap the benefits. Don't forget to follow us on Instagram and Facebook and you can always join us on our website at [Petwellness Advocate.com](http://PetwellnessAdvocate.com). And remember our pets deserve our best.