

College of Veterinary Medicine
Pet Health Topics

Clipping a Cat's Toenails

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This information is not meant to be a substitute for veterinary care. Always follow the instructions provided by your veterinarian.



In the photographs below, unless otherwise noted, the top of the paw is facing up. Tigger, who was the feline model, has black pads on his toes. The black pads on the bottom of his toes will help you orient yourself as you view the photographs.

Variations on these instructions exist.

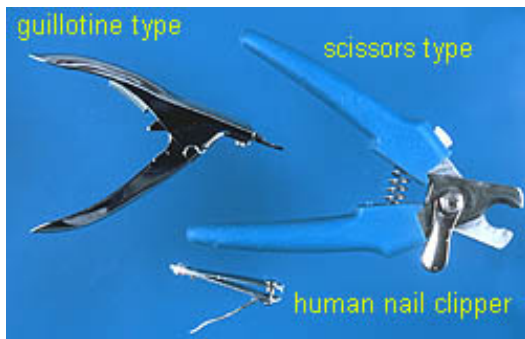
Most cats do not like having their toenails trimmed. Start trimming toenails in young animals so that they get used to the process. Some cats will happily sit in your lap or on a table while you trim their nails but many require some form of restraint. See the section on restraining a cat for some suggestions.



To restrain a cat in your lap, use your forearms draped over the cat's neck and hind-end to keep the cat in your lap. The clipper is held in the right hand.



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There are several styles of nail trimmers, including a guillotine type, a scissors cut, and a standard human fingernail clipper. Either the guillotine type or a human fingernail clipper are easiest to use in cats.

The scissors-type is used if a toe nail is so long that it is curling in a circle. Long toenails can grow into the toepad.



Hold the trimmer in your right hand if you are right handed.

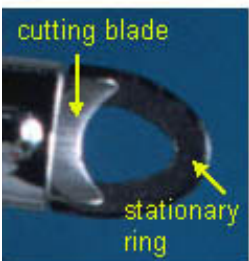


Close you hand around the clipper to squeeze the handle which will move the cutting blade.

this side will face you as you trim nails



this side will face the pet as you trim nails



As the handles are squeezed, the cutting blade slides across the stationary ring.



Cats have retractile claws so you need to gently squeeze the toe between thumb and forefinger to expose the claw.

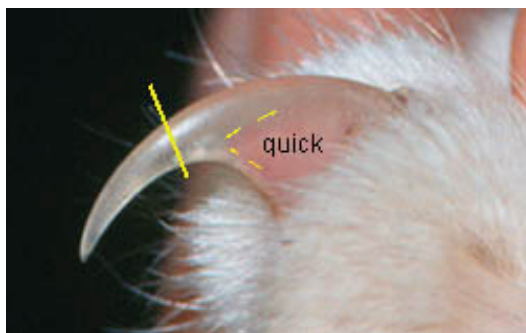


Most cats have light colored toenails, making it easy to see the blood vessels and nerves that supply the toenail as a pink stripe at the base of the nail, which is called a quick. You want to cut the toenail to within approximately



2 millimeters of the quick.

If you cut into the quick, the toenail will bleed and the cat will experience pain.





The clipper should be placed perpendicular to the nail (cutting top to bottom).



Light colored nails can be trimmed with one cut on each nail. (see trimming dog toenails for instructions on trimming dark colored nails)



If the trimmer is placed parallel to the nail (cutting from side to side), the nail is crushed and may splinter.

The sharper the trimmer, the cleaner the cut. You can use a nail file to smooth the end of the nail after clipping.



When using a guillotine type nail trimmer, the cutting blade (outlined in yellow) should be facing you, not the cat. The screws on the trimmer should be facing the cat. The nail should be cut from top to bottom, not side to side. The tip of the nail is placed in the hole in the trimmer and the handles are squeezed to advance the cutting blade through the nail.

The handles of the trimmer can be held pointing toward the floor...

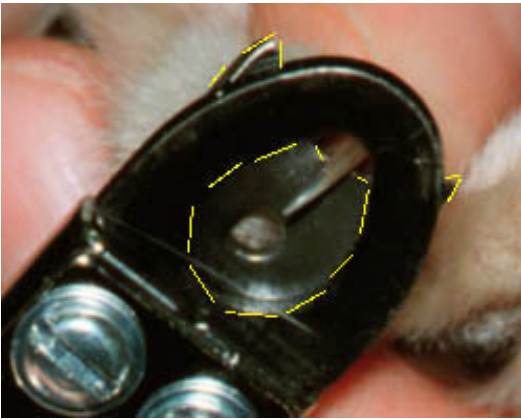


...or ceiling, which ever is more comfortable in your hands.

The cutting blade can be replaced when it is no longer sharp.



When the trimmer is held with the screws toward you, the cutting blade is cutting closer to the quick than if the trimmer is held with the cutting blade toward you. You are less likely to cut into the quick if the cutting blade faces you.



The cutting blade is outlined in yellow.



Cats have a nail on the inner side of each foot called the dew claw. Remember to trim these as they are not worn down when the cat scratches and can grow in a circle, growing into the foot.



In this photograph the trimmer is being held in the reverse of previous photographs, with the handles pointing up instead of down. This is a matter of personal preference, what feels most comfortable to you.

Also cut the dew claw from top to bottom rather than side to side.



If the toenail is cut too short, you can use a styptic pencil containing silver nitrate to stop blood flow, although many animals object to this the styptic pencil as much, or more, than toenail cutting. The black end of the stick is held to the bleeding nail and gently rotated.

Even without any treatment the nail should stop bleeding in about 5 minutes or less.

Photographs by Henry Moore

Washington State University assumes no liability for injury to you or your pet incurred by following these descriptions or procedures.

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