

One of the Worst Vet Choices You Could Make for Your Cat

Times are changing, and this will (hopefully) land squarely in the history books soon, because it's horribly devastating for your cat. By the same token, it's important to sub in this overlooked habit, or your expensive and irreplaceable furnishings could be at risk. You'll be glad you did.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Your cat's claws are an essential part of her anatomy, so the answer to living in harmony with those sharp little weapons is regular nail trims
- There are several reasons to routinely trim your cat's nails, not the least of which is the pain and discomfort overgrown claws can cause your pet
- The best approach to nail trims is to first acclimate kitty to lots of gentle handling before breaking out the nail clippers
- Your nail trim supplies should also include a small flashlight and styptic powder
- If your kitty is very uncomfortable with nail trims, use the clip-and-pause method to allow him to feel he's exercising some control over his situation

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published February 19, 2019.

Cats' claws are a fundamental part of their anatomy, a fact that, fortunately, more and more people are waking up to. Hopefully, one day soon, declaws will finally be seen by one and all as the cruel and unnecessary amputation procedures they are. "Declawing" is a misnomer. What's actually happening is "de-toeing."

Felines are digitigrades, meaning they walk on their toes. Most other mammals, including humans, walk on the soles of their feet. Cats have three bones in each of their toes, just as we have three bones in each of our fingers — two joints and three bones.

A cat's claw actually grows out of the last bone, unlike human fingernails, which grow out of flesh. They're retractable, remaining hidden until kitty needs to use them. Since the claws grow from the bone, in a "de-toeing" procedure, it's the bone that must be amputated to prevent the claw from growing back.

Cats use their claws for balance, exercise, climbing, and stretching and toning the muscles of their legs, back, shoulders and paws. They also use them to hunt and capture prey, to escape or defend against predators and as part of their marking behavior when they live outdoors. Bottom line — claws are as essential to cats as fingers are to humans.

Why Indoor Cats Need Regular Nail Trims

With all that said, it's also important to realize that cats who live indoors with us require a "claw management" program. Feline nails grow continually and indoor living doesn't offer kitties enough opportunities to shorten them naturally. If we don't trim our indoor cat's nails, our expensive furnishings end up shredded and potentially, so does our tender human skin.

Outdoor cats, on the other hand, have shorter nails because they climb and scratch on trees and other rough surfaces. Another reason for regular nail trims is that when your cat's claws grow too long, they become curved and don't retract completely. A sign it's past time for a trim is when kitty gets his nails hooked in the carpet, comforter, your clothing or some other soft surface, or you notice he can no longer fully retract his claws.

In a worst-case scenario, overgrown, curved nails can begin growing into your cat's footpad, which is as painful as it sounds, and can also cause problems with his mobility. For all these reasons, it's extremely important to keep kitty's claws short, which means nail trims on a regular schedule of every 10 days to two weeks.

The Preliminaries

As you might guess, trimming a cat's nails is a bit more challenging than trimming a dog's nails. Ideally, you've been petting, stroking and holding your cat for days or weeks before attempting the first nail trim, to get him as comfortable as possible with being handled.

As part of this practice, be sure to massage kitty's front legs and paws, and press gently on each footpad with your thumb and forefinger to extend the claws. As mentioned earlier, kitty claws are retractable, so a bit of gentle pressure must be applied to the toes to expose the nails in order to clip them, and many cats aren't keen on that, especially when it happens out of the blue.

Veterinarian Dr. JoAnna Pendergrass also recommends acclimating your cat to the sound of nail clippers by placing a piece of uncooked spaghetti in the clippers. While you gently press on a footpad, clip the spaghetti when kitty's claw extends. Release the pressure and immediately offer your cat a treat.¹

Make your handling sessions short and pleasant for your cat, and offer him high-value treats along the way to help him link being handled with yummy snacks.

It's important to keep in mind that felines are very sensitive to the energy around them, and if there's tension or stress in the air, their first instinct is to try to escape. That's why the best way to start a nail trim is to make sure you're calm and not nervous, because it's a given your emotional state will be picked up by your pet.

Step two is to have someone assist you — a "cat cuddler." Cuddling kitty during a nail trim is a must-do. It keeps your cat from bolting and makes her feel a bit more secure. Once the clipper comes out, treats aren't much help with most cats. Whereas dogs will be distracted by treats, the majority of cats won't. They seem to understand you're trying to divert their attention, and they don't go for it.

Lights, Camera, Styptic Powder

Just kidding about the camera, but you'll definitely need a small flashlight to help you see the quick of each nail before clipping. Styptic powder has blood-clotting properties. If you trim a nail too close and draw blood, the powder will immediately stop the bleeding.

Hold the clipper perpendicular to the nail so you're cutting from top to bottom, since cutting side to side can split the nail. Don't trim the pink part of the nail — don't even get near it with your clipper — just trim the clear end of the nail. Snipping off the sharp and sometimes jagged tips at the end of kitty's claws will prevent rug snags, paw damage, shredding of furniture around the house and injury to the other pets and people.

If your kitty seems nervous at all, do one nail at a time. Clip and stop, clip and stop, until all the nails are trimmed. If she's really stressed or fighting you or your helper, take a longer break between paws. You can even wait a day. The goal is to get her as comfortable with the procedure as possible, so whatever you can do to reduce her stress and yours is the way to go.

When you trim your cat's nails regularly, there's really no need to do all four paws at once. You can let your kitty set the pace — do a couple of nails, then stop. Do a paw a day if that works out for you and your cat.

Cats like to feel in control of their environment and become very stressed when they're not. So allow your best feline friend to feel some control during nail trims with the clip and pause method. This will reduce his stress around the entire activity of nail trims, and since it's something you'll need to do regularly throughout his life, the more comfortable he is with it, the better.

Sources and References

¹ [PetMD, December 6, 2018](#)
