

Let's Cut to the Quick

- Janine Fiorito

There is an important step that needs to be done first before a Golden Retriever's foot can be properly groomed. The dog's nails need to be cut in order to groom a foot to look the best it can. Cutting a dog's nails is also important for the good health of the dog, not only for a nice, neat appearance.

Unless your dog has a major health problem, such as a bleeding disorder, a Golden Retriever will not bleed to death if you cut a nail too short. Usually, all that is spilled are a few drops of blood, lots of Kwik-Stop and an owner's tear or two. Causing your dog a minute amount of discomfort should not outweigh the benefits of cutting your dog's nails.

Anyone who has had a friendly dog jump up on them and rake them with their long nails can attest to how much discomfort a dog's nails can cause. Letting a dog's nails grow too long can also lead to health issues, not to mention the annoying click of long nails on hard floor surfaces. Nails that are overgrown can, over time, deform the shape of a dog's toes and feet. Overly long nails reduce the efficiency of the dog's paw, making it more difficult for a dog to get the proper traction it needs when it walks or runs. If you have a dog that has become afraid to walk on hardwood floors or sheet vinyl flooring, it may be that the dog's nails are too long. The dog may not be able to properly grip the surface of the flooring with its feet and is afraid of slipping. A performance dog needs properly cut nails to work more efficiently and pain free in obedience, agility or the field. I can't imagine the discomfort a dog with very long nails must feel landing after going over a moderate-size jump. In the show ring, a Golden Retriever's excessively long nails can make a proper tight paw look like an improper hare foot.

Now that you know some of the reasons for keeping your Golden Retriever well pedicured, let's cover how to cut your dog's nails. First, a little information about the structure of the dog's toenail. The top of a dog's nail is covered with a hard outer sheath. As the outer sheath curves around the sides of the nail, the thickness of it thins out. The underside of a dog's nail is softer. You can sometimes poke your own fingernail up under a dog's nail to see the difference in hardness of the top of the nail to the underside of the nail. The top side of a dog's nail curves downward as it extends from the toe. The underside of a dog's nail grows out from the toe in a rather straight line. A little hook tends to form after the top and bottom of the nail meet and continue to grow. Running through the center of a dog's nail is the "quick," or the main blood vessel that nourishes the nail. It is this blood vessel that scares most dog owners away from cutting their own dog's nails. Where the bottom straight line of the nail comes together with the top curve is approximately where the quick usually ends (see Figures 1 and 2, below). Your dog's nail profile may differ somewhat.

THE DAILY GRIND, OR A CUT ABOVE?

How do we go about keeping our dog's nails short, and what products should we use? Let's start with the different methods of trimming nails. Basically, either you manually cut a dog's toenails with a clipper or you use a mechanical grinding wheel with an abrasive surface that grinds the nails down. The electric nail grinders and Dremel tools have been gaining popularity in recent years. Most people are averse to the sight of a drop of blood, and they can grind back a dog's

nails with less fear of causing the dog to bleed. The grinding wheel also has the advantage of leaving the dog's nails short with no rough edges. Some dogs who will not stand for having their nails cut with a clipper will stand peacefully while their nails are ground back.

The electric nail grinders do have some drawbacks, however. They are more expensive than a mechanical nail clipper, at approximately \$50 versus \$4. Nail grinders can cause a dog some discomfort. The speeding, rotating sanding drum against the dog's nails causes friction, and that friction causes heat, and that heat causes pain. Anyone who has used a grinder knows the smell of overheated nail; it smells like burnt hair.

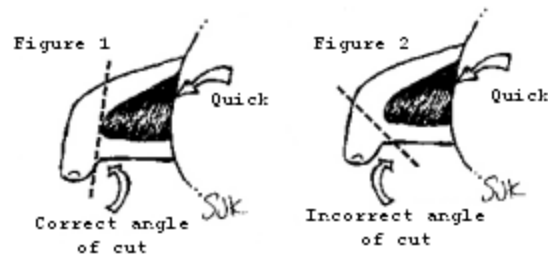
Operated properly, a grinder can be invaluable, but read all the instructions carefully before using it for the first time. Perhaps a lesson or two from someone experienced in using a grinder would also be a good idea. Used improperly, a nail grinder can cause discomfort to a dog and even injury to the person using it. The rotating wheel can also damage a dog's coat if it accidentally gets caught up in it. Some people use a cut-off piece of panty hose or a product like Vet Wrap to wrap up the feathers on the dog's legs to prevent them from being tangled up in the nail grinder. The biggest drawback to me for grinding a dog's nails is the time it takes. I can cut all the nails on my dog in the time it takes to properly grind back one nail. The biggest plus of the grinder is that because many dog enthusiasts feel safer using the grinders to keep their dog's nails short, they don't put off the chore of nail trimming.

My favorite tool for cutting nails is an inexpensive, double-bladed nail clipper, or more specifically, the Millers Forge safety nail clippers. I do not recommend the guillotine-type clippers for two reasons. The guillotine-type nail clippers have only one cutting blade, and they tend to crush the dog's nail against the non-cutting surface. This can be painful for the dog. The second reason for not using the guillotine-type nail clippers is that they are unwieldy to handle, which makes it hard to clip a dog's nails accurately.

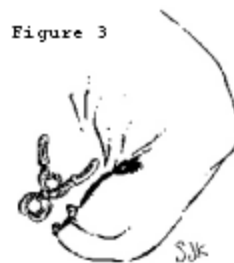
The bulkiness of the heavy-duty-type nail clippers makes them hard to use also. I only use them if I run into an extremely hard nail or very large breed of dog. For your average Golden Retriever, the inexpensive nail clippers will work very well. I buy two or three at a time and just toss them out as the blades become dull. It is important to have clippers with sharp blades to be as quick, efficient and painless as possible. Millers Forge nail clippers have a little metal safety stop on them to prevent you from taking off too much nail at a time. I never use it and push it completely down and out of the way. You want to be able to see where you are cutting the dog's nail and at what angle.

The angle you cut can really make a difference. Remember I mentioned the structure of a dog's nail? Well, here is where that information can come in handy. You should cut a dog's nail angled back, so that the top of the nail is slightly shorter than the bottom of the nail (see Figure 1). This will cut back more of the harder surfaces of the nail and help the dog wear the softer part down naturally by everyday walking and activity. Most people, however, will angle the cut of the nail by just clipping the hook off it (see Figure 2), which is a safe way. It avoids the chance of making the dog bleed by getting too close to the quick. However, it does not encourage the quick to recede or help the dog wear its nails down naturally. I try to get as close to the quick as I can without making the dog bleed. A sharp nail clipper will allow you to cut a dog's nails a little slice at a time, if necessary. This way you can see how far you have to go before you run into the quick. Sometimes after you cut one nail it is easier to judge where the quick is on the other nails,

and the rest of the nail cutting can proceed faster. An interesting side note: The nails on the rear feet are usually not as long as the nails on the front feet, and the two outside nails on the front feet are usually shorter than the two middle ones.



I usually cut my dog's nails up on the grooming table for added control over them. Any way you are relaxed holding your dog's foot in order to cut its nails is fine as long as it is a comfortable position for both you and your dog. I usually hold my dog's foot as I would pick up a horse's foot in order to clean out its hoof. The front foot is turned back to cut the nails (see Figure 3). The rear foot is held back in a similar manner.



KWIK-STOP, QUICK

No matter how careful you are, at one point or another you will nick the dog's quick. At the same time you purchase your nail grinder or nail clipper you should also buy a styptic-type powder product to aid in stopping any bleeding that may occur. Read the directions carefully to learn how it should be used most effectively. Most people do not use a Kwik-Stop product correctly. It is the same old story: if some is good, then more has to be better. The dog winds up with a yellow, caked mess of a foot in response to three drops of blood. Many styptic powder products are used the same way, and packing a dog's foot with Kwik-Stop is not the best way to stop the bleeding.

Calmly moisten a Q-Tip with a little water or alcohol first. Dip the moistened Q-Tip into the Kwik-Stop and get a small amount of the product on the cotton tip. Take the Q-Tip and dab it on the bleeding nail repeatedly until it stops the flow of blood. Occasionally you may have to apply a second Q-Tip full of Kwik-Stop to stop the bleeding. Rarely will this alone fail to stem the flow of blood. If you have really cut a nail way too short, another step may be needed. Hold up the foot and apply a little pressure to the offending toe by gently squeezing it between your thumb and pointer finger at the point where the toe joins the foot. Once the flow has lessened, the Kwik-Stop will be more effective. If you have cut or ground a dog's nails too short that they have bled, it is advisable to keep the dog quiet in a crate for a few hours. If you let the dog tear around the house too soon, be prepared to clean blood spots out of your carpet.

FOOT FETISHES

No article on nail cutting would be complete without addressing the dog with a foot fetish. Many dogs whose owners think hate to have their nails cut actually just hate to have their feet touched or held. The actual nail-cutting procedure is not what drives them crazy.

If you are not sure whether your dog has a foot fetish or just dislikes having its nails cut, try these simple tests. While your dog is sitting or lying down comfortably, go up to it and gently pick up its paw while you talk sweetly to it and give it a treat or two. If your dog resists having its paw held, there is a good chance that your dog has a thing about its feet. If your dog allows you to gently hold its paw, try to put a little pressure on it by squeezing it lightly. Watch how your dog reacts. When we cut a dog's nails, we have to have a good hold on its paw. Some dogs don't like to have their feet squeezed. If your dog is still happy and relaxed, try touching its toenails. Does the dog react, or is it still relaxed? If your dog has had a problem with any of these three tests and hates when you cut its nails, there is a chance that it is not the nail cutting the dog objects to but that it has a foot fetish.

Fortunately, there are things that can help. Start by desensitizing your dog to having its feet touched and gently squeezed, in a relaxed environment not normally used to cut the dog's nails. It helps to have a pocketful of small dog treats. Make sure your dog is relaxed, whether sitting or lying down next to you. Talk reassuringly to your dog as you gently, with an open palm, pick up your dog's foot. If your dog allows its foot to be gently picked up, tell it "Good dog" and give it a treat. Don't give it a treat until it is calmly allowing you to hold its foot. Eventually, you can progress to applying a little pressure or gentle squeeze. When your dog can calmly and routinely tolerate that, progress to the grooming table and start by just gently lifting the foot again, praising the dog and giving it a treat. A dog with a foot fetish needs to get used to having its foot held and squeezed without resisting as a separate issue from the nail-cutting procedure. If your dog has a serious foot fetish, it is sometimes necessary for you to consult with a professional dog trainer to help your dog become mannerly about the nail-trimming procedure.

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