

How to Maintain Dog Paw Health

By Barbara Brown



If you have ever had a stone bruise or cut on your foot, you know how painful it can be and how much it interferes with normal daily activities. This is true for your dog, too. As a responsible pet owner, it is your job to make sure that your dog's paws are healthy. Your dog paw health regimen should include routine inspection for cuts, nail trims, and protection when your dog is being exposed to harsh outdoor conditions.

Dog Paw Health Basics

Did you know that your dog walks on his toes or pads rather than on the soles of his feet like humans? The dog's paw has four toes each with its own nail. Depending on your dog's breed, his paws may be short and sleek, elongated, or webbed. The smaller, narrower paws are the result of a shortened third digital bone. The smaller paws are easier to raise and move which allows the dog to conserve energy walking or running. Toys breeds and small dogs may have elongated or hare feet that aid in balance. And, water dogs, like the retrievers, may have slight webbing between their toes to facilitate movement in the water.

To maintain your dog's paw health, check its paws for cuts after walking, especially if your hike takes you over rough terrain or through urban areas where there may have been bits of broken glass. Dog's paws should be kept clean and dry using a soft cloth rubbed gently over the paw surface. Keep your pet's nails trimmed fairly short. If your dog is limping or excessively licking its paws, check the paws visually and follow the guidance offered under **Dog Paw Health – Dealing with Injuries**.

Routine care and surveillance will keep your dog's paws healthy and limit potentially costly vet visits.

Paw care tip: Not all dogs like having their paws messed with even by their beloved owners. You should begin touching and gently moving paws and toes when your dog is a puppy. This will help it get used to having its feet touched and may make dog paw health care easier in your adult dog.

Dog Paw Health – Dew Claws

Dew claws are vestigial claws that are positioned on the inside of the leg above the foot. Most dogs have dew claws on their front legs and some dogs will have one or two dew claws on the rear legs. In some breeds of dog, such as the Great Pyrenees, the absence of dew claws is considered a breed fault. For most dogs, dew claws serve no purpose and can become inflamed or torn during vigorous activities. A dew claw may also cut the dog's face if rubbed against it during scratching.

There is some disagreement among dog paw health practitioners about whether dew claws should be removed. Those that favor removal claim that the dew claw is a weak joint that is easily damaged and difficult to properly care for. Those against removal of dew claws believe that it is painful for the dog and for some breeds the loss may interfere with traction or holding food. Whether you choose to remove a puppy's dew claws is a decision you should make in consultation with your vet.

Dog Paw Health – Nail Care

For optimum dog paw health, you should trim its nails every four to six weeks unless it spends a lot of time on concrete to wear them down naturally. Most dogs do not like having their nails cut and may put up active resistance. It is wise to begin your dog paw health nail trimming when your dog is a puppy, but even then there are likely to be challenges. Using a professional groomer or your vet may be a solution if there are frequent battles with your dog about paw health nail care.

For the do-it-yourselfers, there are two basic types of nail trimmers. The **Guillotine style** where the nail is passed through a metal hoop and the blade is quickly closed chopping off the nail and the **Scissors style**. Most owners find the guillotine style easier to use especially with smaller dogs. However, the blades need to be changed and that can be a hassle. The scissor style trimmers work better with larger dogs that have tougher, thicker nails.

Whichever nail trimmer you choose to maintain your dog's paw health, be sure that it has a built-in guard to keep from cutting too deep. In general, plan on removing about 1/8 of an inch of nail. Some owners and groomers are pleased with a sander, like the Dremmel, that can be used after cutting and for some dogs used in place of trimmers.

Your dog will need to be kept still while its nails are trimmed. You can hold the dog in place by draping your arm over it or laying it on its side and leaning against it. Professional groomers have special restraints that help limit movement. Position your trimmer so that the dog's nail can be cut from underneath, not from the top downward. If you cut too deeply and the nail bleeds, use a tiny piece of tissue paper and light pressure. Bleeding should stop within five to seven minutes. If not, you should contact your vet.

Dog Paw Health grooming tip: Trimming your dog's nails is MUCH easier if you have a partner to help hold the dog still and comfort it during the procedure.

Dog Paw Health – Dealing with Injuries

If your dog's paw is bleeding from a small cut, clean the paw with peroxide and apply a dry cloth with pressure to stop the bleeding. As it heals, keep the paw clean and reapply peroxide twice a day for two to three days. Anything more serious than a small cut should be evaluated by your dog paw health care provider because the dog may require stitches, deep cleaning to remove bits of glass or embedded burrs, and oral antibiotics.

If your dog's paw is sore for more than a couple days without a visible cut or you have any reason to believe that it may have stepped in a toxic substance, take it to the vet immediately for evaluation and treatment.

Dog Paw Health – Special care for harsh conditions

There are special dog shoes or booties that should be part of your supplies to maintain dog paw health if your dog is outdoors in snow and ice, walks over rough terrain with sharp stones, or it needs extra traction for walking or climbing. Dog boots slip over the paw and are usually anchored with Velcro. The bottom of the boot has a rough surface for traction and the thickness protects the dog's paws from bruising. You can find dog boots in several sizes at your pet supply store.

Dog Paw Health tip for harsh conditions: Dogs can get pieces of ice wedged between their paw pads or stuck to their paw's fur. The ice should be removed immediately after returning from his walk. If your dog has a lot of fur between his toes which is typical of long haired dogs like Golden Retrievers, your dog paw health maintenance should include trimming or cutting the fur and getting the paw clean.

Following these simple procedures and guidelines will ensure that your dog's paws remain healthy and your pet comfortable and happy.

Barbara Brown is a freelance writer who lives with her husband and two dogs in Texas. You can read more stories on pets and other topics at her website: <http://alternatingcurrents.info>.