

How Can Cats Overcome Fear of Claw-Trimming?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger discusses how to get cats acclimated to the claw-trimming experience.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: We adopted two bonded 18-month-old cats, Zoe and Nate, from our local humane society. They are both very active and happy cats and we love them dearly. They are wonderful except for one problem. We can not trim their nails. Whenever we approach them with the clippers they run and hide. We've tried wrapping them in towels but they scream and act terrified. They've also left scars on our arms in their efforts to get away when we try to trim their nails. Their nails are so long that they are constantly getting caught in the sofa and on their cat tree. I'm afraid they are going to hurt themselves.

How can we trim their nails without putting our lives in jeopardy and terrorizing them?

A: It is common for cats who weren't habituated to claw-trimming as kittens to hate having their claws trimmed as adults. The whole claw-trimming exercise can cycle into a very traumatizing event for both the cat and the human. The more the cat is held against her will, or wrapped in a towel while trying to escape, the harder it becomes to trim her claws and the more terrified the cat becomes.

Claw-trimming can become an easier, more relaxed event through counter-conditioning: changing the cat's negative claw-trimming experience to a positive one. The process needs to occur when the cat is relaxed, lounging next to you or in your lap. Have tiny treats readily available that your cat adores. Start by gently touching your cat's leg or paw while she's relaxed. If she doesn't protest or pull back, reward her with a tiny treat. After she eats the treat and relaxes, repeat the process, this time lingering a little longer and stroking her paw or leg once. Treat her again if she allows you to stroke her. At the first sign of tension or protest stop touching her. Don't reward her, don't pet her. Start another session later on, when she's relaxed again. Slowly and gently acclimatize her to having her legs and paws touched and stroked by increasing the stroke count each time. Reward her with a tiny treat for each small progressive step.

When she shows any signs of displeasure, you are proceeding too quickly and need to start over, taking it slower. With patience and a few sessions, you should be able to stroke her paws without her protesting. After she allows you to stroke her paws, start gradually massaging each of her toes. Again, reward her with a treat for those small positive baby steps. Up the criteria after your cat allows the toe massages by pressing each of her toes to extend a claw. Reward her with a treat when she is relaxed and allows her claws to be extended without protesting or becoming anxious.

Familiarizing your cat with the nail clippers is also important for a stress-free claw-trimming experience. Help your cat get used to the clippers by placing them near her so that she can investigate them. Treat her if she doesn't react aversively or anxiously to them. When she is familiarized with the clippers, touch her paws and toes with them, getting her used to having them around her paws. Now you can start trimming her claws. Make sure to give her a treat after you trim her claws.

You may find that you can only clip one or two of your cat's claws at a time. Sometimes it takes a few sessions to successfully trim all of the claws without the cat becoming upset. Every cat is an individual. Some cats can be quickly conditioned to having their claws trimmed; others take multiple sessions over a few weeks.