

*from the Health and Genetics Committee ...*

## **Keeping up with those pesky toenails!**

by

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Of the many things we can count on in life, the incredible speed that American Water Spaniel toenails grow has to be high on that list! The nails are black, thick and they don't love to have them trimmed. It's no wonder they can get away from us and in some cases, become a real problem. Let's talk a little bit about the nails of a dog and then we will talk about why it is so important to keep them as short as possible.

The canine nail adheres very tightly to the last bone of the toe. When it grows, it curves down towards the ground. If the nail is too long, it will cause the angle of the bones to be pushed back every time the foot hits the ground. Over time, this will lead to arthritis in the toes and cause the dog to have pain with every step. If the issue is not corrected, all the joints up the leg will eventually be affected because they will be forced to work at an unnatural angle. The carpal (wrist) joint, elbow, shoulder and neck will all be affected. Dogs are amazing at compensating so if there are issues in the front assembly of a dog they will then try to offset that by changing how they use all the joints in their body. Again, over time, this will lead to arthritis and chronic pain for the dog. This chronic pain could cut short the career of a dog that performs in any venue whether that is agility, hunting or any one of the many jobs a dog can do. Our dogs are so stoic that they will often push through their discomfort until it is just too painful for them to continue. So much time, energy and money are invested in shaping a great working partner that it seems a shame to cut that short because of poor nail care.

Nails that are too long can also greatly affect the dog's balance and ability to navigate some terrain. This can lead to a stumble or misplaced foot which could cause an injury. Balance is also extremely important for our senior dogs. Sometimes just trimming the toenails can be the key to helping a senior dog stay mobile. Long nails can also break off or in very extreme cases could grow into the dog's pads. Both of these scenarios can lead to a trip to the vet and some unforeseen expenses in addition to the pain it causes the dog.

Ideally, nails should be trimmed frequently enough to keep them from touching the floor. If you can hear the telltale click-click of your dog walking across the floor then they are too long and need to be trimmed. Lifestyle, activity and individual make up will determine the right timing for each dog but for most this will need to be every few weeks. You may choose to take them to a grooming shop, pet store or your veterinary clinic to have someone trim the nails. You may choose to do it at home as part of a regular grooming routine.

If you are going to do the nails at home, you will need some basic equipment. A grooming table is a great thing to have for all sorts of reasons. It is well worth the investment to get a good grooming table with an adjustable arm. They are not terribly expensive and are wonderful to have not only for nail

trimming but for ear cleaning, tick removal and any grooming you need to do. You can also get a “lick mat” to put on the grooming arm. This is a rubber pad that you can smear yummy stuff like peanut butter or cheese on to occupy your dog while you trim. I prefer to use a cordless Dremel tool to do my dog’s nails as they do not seem to mind it as much. If you are going to use trimmers, the plier style ones work best. You will also want to have a small container of Kwik Stop or a similar clotting product to stop the bleeding if you trim too short. Another selling point for the Dremel is that you are less likely to cut too short and cause bleeding when you Dremel the nails.

The best plan is to start trimming the nails of your new puppy as soon as you get it home. Hopefully your breeder will have been conditioning the puppy to having their feet handled and has trimmed the nails so you will not be starting completely from scratch. If not, you can start by using treats to condition your dog to having their feet handled. Give them treats while you are handling the feet (not after you let go) so that it is a pleasant experience. This could be a good place to introduce the lick mat so they associate the two together. The lick mats have suction cups so you can stick it to a cupboard door and let them lick something yummy while you handle feet. Once the dog is comfortable with the handling of the feet you can start by trimming just one or two nails. Remember that all praise and treats come while you are trimming not after you are done. You want nail trimming to be something they look forward to. Take your time conditioning your dog to tolerate this part of their care. The time you invest at the beginning will be well worth it when you have a dog who sees nail trimming as no big deal. I would not say that my AWS like having their nails done but they certainly tolerate it well and because of that it takes only a few minutes to get it done.

We should all be in agreement that keeping your dog’s nails trimmed is crucial to their overall wellbeing. There are so many aspects of our dog’s health that we have no control over so let’s be proactive in these things that we can control. Sometimes it is just a matter of being more aware of our dog’s feet so we can stay on top of those nails.

