

# Nail Care and Dewclaws for the Agility Dog



© DIANE LEWIS PHOTOGRAPHY

By Brittany Jean Carr, DVM, CCRT and Chris Zink, DVM, PhD, DACVP, DACVSMR, CCRT, CVA, CSMT

Photos courtesy of VOSM except where noted.

Keeping your dogs' nails properly trimmed reduces the risk of injury.

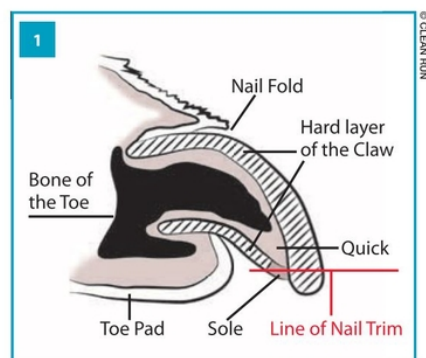
A dog's nail is composed of two major parts—the quick, which contains the blood supply and nerve that nourish the nail, and the hard outer encasing. See **Figure 1**. The quick contains a nerve that transfers sensory input to the brain.

It is important to pay attention to your dog's nail care, keeping the nails short and rounded at the ends to reduce the chance of injury and provide the best grip. It is a common misconception that nails should be left a little long in agility dogs to improve grip; dogs have a remarkable ability to flex the toes

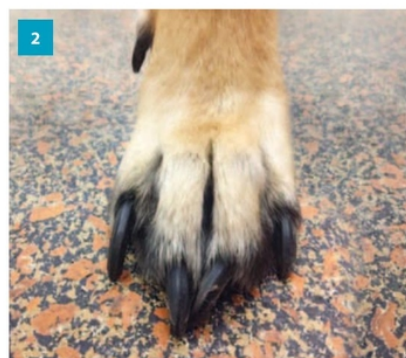
when needed to grip the ground, so nail length isn't a factor. In fact, if the nails are too long, they can get caught on substrates such as turf and grass, on the slats on the contact equipment, or even in the gaps between the ramps of the dogwalk, creating torque on the toe, resulting in damage to the flexor or extensor tendons or the lateral or medial collateral ligaments.

In addition, long nails easily become ingrown, folding back to penetrate the pad or tissues between the toes. Further, long nails increase the strain on the flexor tendons, causing the bones in the toe to flatten, placing additional stress on the joints and soft tissues. This can cause discomfort just while the dog is standing. In a moving dog, this can cause difficulty negotiating uneven or unstable surfaces. These alterations can cause abnormal stance and gait patterns that predispose the dog to compensatory injuries.

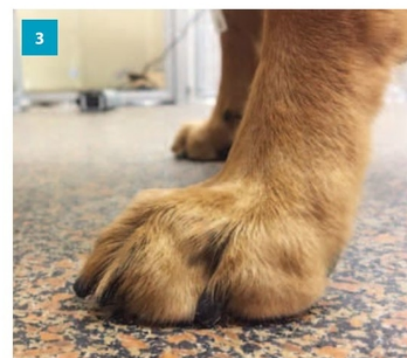
If you can hear your dog's toenails clicking as they walk across the floor, they are due for a trim! The nails should not protrude over the pad when the foot is in a relaxed position, and should not touch the ground when the dog is standing. See **Figures 2 and 3**. Depending on how much activity dogs get on hard surfaces, on the shape of their feet, and individual variation to some extent, some dogs need a



A dog's nail is composed of two major parts—the quick, the blood supply and nerve that nourish the nail and the hard outer encasing.



This dog's nails protrude past the pad and make contact with the floor while standing. This dog's nails are too long.



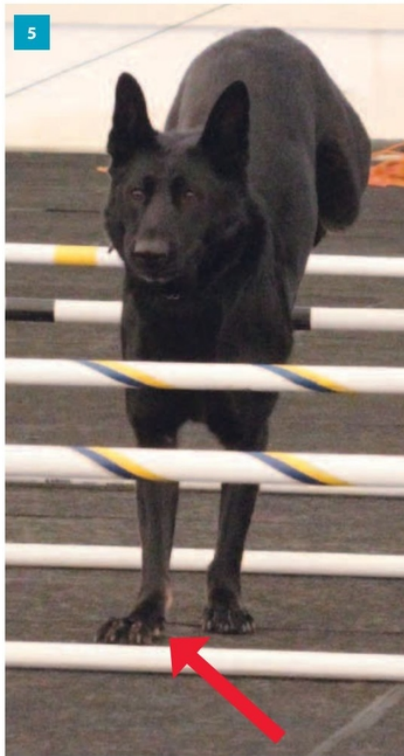
A dog with properly trimmed nails.

4



Many people learn to cut directly across the dog's nail as shown in A. One way to avoid cutting the quick is to use scissor-style nail trimmers to skim a slice off the top of the nail.

5



The dewclaws are in full contact with the running surface when the dog canters or gallops.

6



There are several tendons that connect muscles of the limbs to the dewclaw, suggesting the dewclaw has an important function in locomotion.

nail trim every other week, while others can go several months with little or no trimming needed.

When trimming the nail, it is important to stay far enough from the quick to avoid discomfort and bleeding. Cutting the quick can be painful for your dog, and can also cause profuse bleeding, which can be stopped with a dab of nail styptic powder that acts as a coagulant. If you have been trained to properly trim nails, you can trim your dog's nails yourself. However, if you are uncomfortable or concerned, you should have a professional trim your dog's nails.

In dogs with white or tan colored nails, it is usually easy to visualize the quick in good light. However, dogs with black nails can be more challenging to trim as the quick is not visible. One way to avoid cutting the quick in a black nail (or any other nail) is to use scissor-style nail trimmers to skim a slice off the top

of the nail. See **Figure 4**. This will make the nail wear down more readily and will often help the quick to retract, making it less likely to cut the quick next time.

### The Dewclaw

Contrary to popular belief, dewclaws have an important function.

Dogs have five digits on their front feet. Four of the five digits (equivalent to our fingers) are in contact with the ground when the dog is standing. The other digit, commonly known as the dewclaw, is not in contact with the ground at a stance.

There is much debate over the function and importance of dewclaws on the front limbs, and many people mistakenly believe that they have an insignificant function in movement. Thus, many dewclaws are removed from purebred puppies within a few days of birth. Many breeders believe removing the front dewclaws gives a cleaner, straighter look to the dog's front legs. Others believe dewclaws should be removed to prevent injury. However, with recent reports of increased incidence of carpal osteoarthritis in dogs without dewclaws, many veterinary professionals are now starting to advocate for leaving the front dewclaws intact.

While the dewclaw does not contact the ground at a stance, it does contact the ground when dogs are cantering or galloping and bearing weight on their lead leg. See **Figure 5**. At that point, the dewclaw is available to dig into the ground to help stabilize the front leg and resist torque when the dog is turning. This function is confirmed when one reviews the anatomy of the dog. There are four to five tendons that connect the dewclaw to the muscles of the limb, demonstrating that it does in fact have a function. See **Figure 6**.



Note: A video is available. Watch at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yp2xHj\\_NJn4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yp2xHj_NJn4) or from the March 2017 play list on the Clean Run magazine YouTube channel.


Another function of the dewclaw can actually save a dog's life. When dogs slip through the ice of a pond (or intentionally go swimming in freezing water), they cannot lift themselves out of the water and onto the ice without the use of the dewclaws acting as little ice picks on the medial side of each leg. Take a look at this video for a demonstration of how this little appendage can actu-

ally save the lives of dogs, and even sometimes of the humans that are trying to save them: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4XflsMEk-k> (you can also select it from the March 2017 play list on the Clean Run magazine YouTube channel).

Lastly, to the best of our knowledge, there are no wild carnivores that do not have dewclaws. If they really had no function, would they be present on every carnivore?

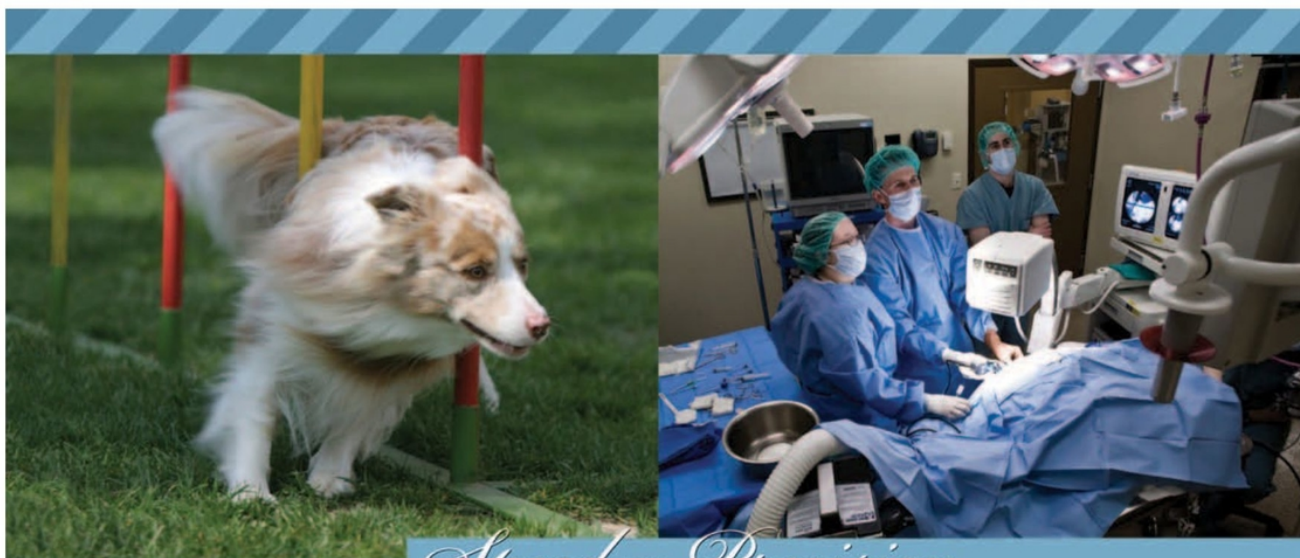
Having examined the importance of front limb dewclaws, it is interesting to note that dewclaws on the rear limb are almost always vestigial and should be removed within a few days of birth, except in those breeds such as the Great Pyrenees, Beauceron, Icelandic Sheepdog, Briard, and perhaps a few others that specify the presence of rear dewclaws.

## References

Levy I, Hall C, Trentacosta N, Percival M. A preliminary retrospective survey of injuries occurring in dogs participating in canine agility. *Vet Comp Orthop Traumatol.* 2009; 22:321-324. Doi:10.3415/VCOT-08-09-0089. 

*Brittany Jean Carr, DVM, CCRT, earned her Bachelor of Science in biology from Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. She then attended the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine at Virginia Tech, where she earned her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. Dr. Carr completed a small animal rotating internship and a surgical internship before starting her residency program through the American College of Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation at Veterinary Orthopedic & Sports Medicine Group in Annapolis Junction, Maryland. Dr. Carr is a Certified Canine Rehabilitation Therapist through the Canine Rehabilitation Institute. Dr. Carr's research studies include regenerative medicine, objective gait analysis, and return to sport following CCL injury. You can learn more about Dr. Carr at [www.VOSM.com](http://www.VOSM.com).*

*Chris Zink, DVM, PhD, CCRT, CVA, CMST, DACVP, DACVSMR, is the award-winning author of Peak Performance: Coaching the Canine Athlete and Dog Health, Nutrition for Dummies and The Agility Advantage and co-author of Jumping From A to Z: Teach Your Dog to Soar and the DVD Building the Canine Athlete. Her books have been translated into numerous languages worldwide. Dr. Zink has also obtained more than 80 agility, obedience, retrieving, tracking, and conformation titles on dogs from the sporting, herding, working, terrier and hound groups. She was voted Outstanding Woman Veterinarian in 2009. Dr. Zink presents Coaching the Canine Athlete seminars worldwide to rave reviews. Her veterinary training and experience in canine athletics provide a unique perspective on canine sports medicine. Dr. Zink provides private consultations to sporting and working dogs, and also practices sports medicine and rehabilitation at Veterinary Orthopedic & Sports Medicine Group in Annapolis Junction, Maryland. You can learn more about Dr. Zink by visiting [www.caninesports.com](http://www.caninesports.com) or [www.VOSM.com](http://www.VOSM.com).*



## Speed AND Precision

ARE THERE OBSTACLES to your athlete's performance? Veterinary Orthopedic & Sports Medicine Group will make a diagnosis quickly and accurately, getting your athlete back on course. VOSM is committed to providing the best veterinary orthopedic, sports medicine, and rehabilitative care for your agility dog by utilizing the most advanced veterinary practices, techniques, and equipment available. Call us today, or visit [www.VOSM.com](http://www.VOSM.com) to learn more.

- Sports medicine
- Diagnostic musculoskeletal ultrasound
- Arthroscopic & orthopedic surgery
- Regenerative medicine & stem cell therapy
- Spine center specializing in neurologic conditions
- Objective gait analysis system



10975 Guilford Road, Annapolis Junction, MD 20701

240-295-4400