



TRIMMING TOENAILS

By Susan Smith

Summer 2012

Many members confess that toenail trimming can induce psychic trauma -- to the human as much as the rabbit! Over the years we've learned several tricks to minimize the stress of nail trimming.

First, you can always ask your vet to trim the nails. Depending on the surface your rabbit runs around on, this is done every 3-6 months. We check nail length on our foster rabbits every three to four months. Rabbits have four toes on each hind foot, each of roughly equal length. A front paw has five toes, four longer ones and a short, dew claw toward the back center (where our thumb is). The dew claw is easy to miss and, if neglected, can actually curl into the paw and damage it. Madison Bunny Day offers toenail trimming by experienced vet techs. In Waukesha County, the HAWS rabbit volunteers offer monthly toenail trims at Pet Supplies Plus.

Rabbits really dislike having their feet touched. This makes toenail trims a challenge. More than once I've received a strong stomach punch or deep scratches from an annoyed rabbit. One solution is to wrap the rabbit in a thick bath towel, making a "bunny burrito." Let one paw stick out from the towel at a time to trim it. Make sure that the rabbit's head is visible for unobstructed breathing.

Nowadays I seldom use a bunny burrito. Instead, I place a thick towel on my lap, set the bunny atop it, and then trim each foot as the bunny stands on my lap. I can even do this with rabbits who don't know me. Magic! What's the secret? The most important is to Stay Calm. Rabbits read our emotions. If I'm calm then the rabbit is calm; if I'm anxious or angry, the rabbit picks it up and sends it back to me. I use a calming voice, soft touch, and gently handle each paw. I gently expose each toe, placing fingertips just above the quick so that I don't accidentally clip it and cause bleeding. For rabbits with dark toenails, shine a flashlight from below to see the quick and mark its border with your fingertip. Sometimes it is hard to see the dew claw. In that case, hold the bunny with spine and hips secure against your chest. Extend the paw forward and have a partner clip the nail.

The other trick is to use the right nail trimming tool. Stores sell lots of gadgets. We find two that work well. The first is a large-size pair of human nail clippers, the pincher kind. These are easily held in the hand, fit all but the largest nails, and can be manipulated quickly. Speed is important in nail trimming.

The second kind of nail clipper is made for dogs and has half-moon blades ("Miller's forge" style). These work great, especially for big hind nails. We never use the guillotine-style clipper where the nail is threaded through the blade hole - I have never met a rabbit with the patience for this! We have not used the drill-burr style trimmer; I worry about noise and smell that would stress the rabbit.

I hope these hints will help reduce the "trauma" of toenail trimming in your home!