
LIVING WITH FERRETS

Nail Clipping 101

by Chrissy DeNayer

So, you've taken your darling out of his cage and noticed that "Bandit's" nails are a tad longer than they should be. That's OK, you'll clip them tomorrow...or the next day. Maybe next week. They're not that long, anyway. Besides, if he wiggles around half as much when you're clipping his nails as he does when you're just holding him, you can't imagine how you'll ever be able to trim his nails. How will you avoid clipping them too short? How will you come close to clipping them at all? Well, fear not. Here's everything you ever needed (or wanted) to know about clipping a ferret's nails.

Ferrets have sharp nails, very similar to those of a house cat. Unlike the cat, however, a ferret's nails are not retractable. This means, what you see is what you get. If you hold a ferret's paw, his nails are visible and their full length is exposed (just move the hairs out of the way to see the base of the nail). If you hold a cat's paw, you will see only the tips of the nails protruding from the paw. A slight (very slight) pressure on the center pad will cause the nails to become fully exposed. (Yeee-ouch!!) Ferrets can't do that trick with their nails. Their nails don't retract. Ferret owners agree that this is generally a good thing— not that it prevents ferrets from climbing.

Ferrets' nails grow fairly quickly. Generally, nails should be checked each week and clipped as needed. No more than a quarter of an inch of clear nail should be present past the pink part of the nail. Normally every two to three weeks should be often enough, but each ferret is an individual and that fact, combined with the type of food the ferret consumes, dictate the speed of nail growth.

Watch the progress of your ferret's nails between trimmings (now that's excitement) and, after two or three clippings, you'll have a good idea of how often your darling's nails will require your attention.

Supplies

Now, the supplies you'll need to accomplish the task.



Nail clippers

Be sure the blade is sharp, or the clippers may squeeze the nail too much as it is cut, leaving a ragged edge that will snag on clothing and bedding. Not to mention what a ragged ferret nail will do to your own arm. Cat claw clippers, which resemble a pair of small, mutant scissors work especially well and are available at most pet shops. The more conservative owner may choose to use human finger nail clippers. Experience and personal preference will help you to decide. Dog nail clippers are generally too bulky and sized too large to work well on a ferret's dainty claws.

Ferretone (or similar dietary supplement treat) Simply put... a bribe.

Styptic powder

Just in case a nail is cut too shory. (More on this later.)

Patience A limitless supply will ease the task for both you and your ferret.

Accomplishing the "Deed"

Before describing three preferred nail clipping methods, let's discuss the actual act of clipping the nails. On this topic, there's some good news and some bad news. You already know the bad news: Immobilization of the ferret is mandatory when clipping nails. There are a couple of pieces of good news. First, immobilization is not difficult to achieve and will be explained when we discuss nail clipping methodology later. Second, ferrets have "see through" nails. This means that when you look at your ferret's nails, they're a sort of clear white with some pink in

there, about half way up the nail. Pay attention to that pink area. This is the "quick" — the blood supply to the nail. You do not want to *ever* cut the quick of the nail. Remember, where there's pink, there's blood. If you clip the pink, it will bleed. The ferret will not be happy, and, if you're like me, you'll be mortified that you've harmed your "baby."

Should you accidentally nick the quick, dip the injured nail into the styptic powder. If it does not stop the bleeding, you can also apply some pressure with a clean tissue or towel. The bleeding should stop within a few minutes. If the bleeding persists for more than ten to fifteen minutes, you should contact your veterinarian.

Basically, you want to clip the nail to within an eighth of an inch (1/8") of the quick. Any closer and you run the risk of putting pressure on the quick, which will cause discomfort to the ferret. This will result in wiggling by the ferret and frustration for you.

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Clipping Methodology

There are three common ways to clip your ferret's nails. Each has been proven to be effective. Most people develop an affinity for one method or another. Some people who have several ferrets, may find it necessary to employ a variety of methods to accomplish their nail clipping duties, depending on the personality and tolerance level of each individual ferret. Again, each ferret has its own unique personality. What works for one may not work for another.

The "One Person Scruffing Method"

This method requires a quick and steady hand. Scruff your ferret carefully by clasp the loose skin on the back of his neck (see *AFR* Sept/Oct?? 97). He will become a long, furry, limp noodle. While he's relatively immobile, quickly clip each nail on each dangling paw. You may want to put a drop of Ferretone™ on the ferret's lip so that it will be even less interested in what you're doing with those clippers.

Again, you must work rapidly if you

wish to use this method. You should never hold a ferret by its scruff for extended periods of time without supporting its hindquarters. Which is the perfect segue to the next method.

The "Two Person Scruffing Method"

This method is the easiest to use with an especially active ferret. One person is the "Holder," employing scruffing tactics with one hand and supporting the ferret's rear with the other hand. That leaves the other person playing the role of the "Clipper," free to hold a paw with one hand and clip away with the other. No bribe is required with this method.

Of course, the drawback with this method is that it requires two people. Or a talented land dwelling octopus.

tummy. The ferret will lick the "bribe," oblivious to what you're doing to his nails. It may be necessary to put an extra drop of Ferretone™ on your ferret's belly if he is an especially proficient lick. A variation of this method is my preferred nail clipping method.

You may discover your own variation of one (or more) of these methods that works even better for your



Photos: Dawn Hendricks and Nadine Sufczynski

The "One Person Bribe Method"

This method is based upon distraction as the key to success. Hold your ferret in the crook of your arm or on your lap. The ferret should be on its back with its belly exposed. Put a few drops of the Ferretone™ on the ferret's

ferret(s). Whichever method you choose, your ferret's nail clipping experience, and therefore yours as well, should be as stress free as possible. Considering that you're holding the ferret in a less than natural position and using a device he would consider akin to those favored by the Spanish Inquisitors, "almost stress free" is pretty good, don't you think? Just kidding.

