

From Zoomies to Ouchies – Split Nails Explained

Zoomies gone wrong? Learn why split nails hurt your dog, how to treat them, and simple steps to prevent painful paw problems.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Split or broken nails aren't just painful for dogs — they can cause infections, mobility problems, and even signal deeper health issues if not treated properly
- Dogs' nails have a hard outer shell and a sensitive inner quick; when split, the exposed quick can bleed heavily and cause significant pain
- Trauma, overgrown nails, infections, allergies, and certain diseases like lupus or hypothyroidism can all contribute to brittle, splitting nails in dogs
- First aid includes controlling bleeding, trimming loose fragments, cleaning to prevent infection and stopping your pet from licking — but repeated or severe injuries need veterinary care
- Prevention focuses on regular trims, paw moisturizers, good nutrition with protein, minerals, and omega-3s, and monitoring breed-specific risks to keep nails strong and healthy

Dogs zoom through life with boundless energy — digging in the yard, chasing after toys, or sprinting full speed across the living room rug. But sometimes, that joyful zoom comes to a screeching halt with a painful yelp. One common reason? A split or broken nail.

At first glance, a split nail might not look like a big deal. But if you've ever torn your own fingernail too short, you know how excruciating it can feel. For dogs, nail injuries aren't just painful — they can also lead to infections, mobility problems, and even signal deeper health issues.

Understanding Your Dog's Nails

Before we dive into causes and care, let's look at what makes up a dog's nail. Each nail has two main parts:^{1,2}

- **The outer shell** is made of keratin, the same protein in your hair and nails. This hard layer gives structure and strength.
- **The quick** is a soft inner core filled with blood vessels and nerves. If the quick is exposed or injured, it's painful and can bleed heavily.

Some dogs also have dewclaws — the "thumb-like" nails higher up on the paw of the front legs (and sometimes hind legs). Unlike the main nails, dewclaws don't wear down naturally when walking and are more prone to getting snagged; especially if they are present on the hind legs.

How Do You Know a Nail Is Split?

Often, you'll first notice your dog limping or licking a paw. Sometimes you'll hear a sharp yelp mid-play. Here are the most common signs of a nail problem:^{3,4}

- A visibly cracked, dangling, or missing nail
- Bleeding from the nail or paw
- Swelling or redness around the nail bed
- Sensitivity or pulling the paw away when touched
- Constant licking or chewing at the paw
- Pus, crusts, or a foul smell (a sign of infection)

Because the quick is so sensitive, even a small split can feel like a big injury to your dog.

Why Do Dogs' Nails Split?

Nail splits can happen to any dog, but some pups are more prone than others. Causes fall into two main groups — trauma and underlying health issues.^{5,6,7}

1. **Trauma and accidents** — This is the most common cause. Dogs can snag their nails on carpets, fences, furniture, or even while digging in the dirt. A bad landing from a jump can also crack a nail. Dewclaws, which stick out more, are especially likely to catch and split.
2. **Overgrown nails** — Long nails act like levers — easier to bend, catch, and break. Over time, overgrowth also causes the quick to lengthen, making trimming trickier and splits more likely.
3. **Infections and allergies** — Bacterial or fungal infections can weaken nails. Ringworm, for example, can cause crusty, brittle nails. Dogs with environmental or food allergies may chew their paws, causing repeated damage and splits.
4. **Autoimmune and hormonal diseases** — Conditions like lupus, symmetrical lupoid onychodystrophy (SLO), hypothyroidism, and Cushing's disease can all affect nail health, sometimes causing nails to crumble or fall off.
5. **Nutritional deficiencies** — A poor diet and lack of key nutrients and minerals, like biotin, collagen, omega-3, and zinc, can make nails weak and brittle. Just like hair and skin, nails reflect overall health.
6. **Breed and age factors** — Certain breeds, such as German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, Boxers, and Rottweilers, are more prone to nail-related autoimmune issues. Older dogs and very active dogs are also at higher risk.

What to Do if Your Dog Splits a Nail

A split nail isn't usually life-threatening, but it is painful and needs proper care. Here's what you can do at home before seeing your vet:

1. **Stay calm and restrain gently** — Even the sweetest dog may snap when in pain. A towel wrap or muzzle can keep you safe.

2. **Control bleeding** — Apply gentle pressure with a clean towel or gauze. You can also use styptic powder, cornstarch, or baking flour to stop bleeding.
3. **Remove loose fragments** — If part of the nail is hanging by a thread and your dog tolerates it, you can carefully trim it with pet nail clippers. Never cut deeply into the quick.
4. **Clean the area** — Rinse with lukewarm saltwater to reduce bacteria.
5. **Prevent licking** — Use an e-collar (cone) or bootie to stop chewing.

Call your vet if:

- The nail is split down to the base
- Your dog won't let you touch the paw
- Bleeding won't stop
- There's swelling, pus, or a bad odor
- Splits happen repeatedly

Once at your vet's office, many nail injuries require sedation or at minimum numbing of the affected area to be treated safely. After removing the broken part of the nail and cauterizing it to stop bleeding; your pet's paw may be soaked to clean it or may be wrapped to prevent infection. Laser therapy can be used to help with pain and swelling. Depending on how severe the injured nail is, your pet may also need pain relievers, antibiotics or herbal therapy for the next few days until it heals.

When It's More Than Just a Split

If your dog's nails split once in a blue moon, it's probably just bad luck. But frequent splits or multiple affected nails can signal bigger issues, which means it's time to bring your pet to the vet. They may run tests such as:

- **Cultures** to check for bacterial or fungal infections
- **X-rays** if toes are swollen
- **Bloodwork** to check for hormonal or immune disorders
- **Biopsies** for suspected autoimmune conditions and to screen for cancers that affect the nails/toes such as melanoma

Preventing Nail Splits

The best way to avoid painful nail splits is proper care and maintenance. Here's how you can help keep your dog's nails healthy and strong:

1. **Regular trims** — Keep nails short. Aim so they don't touch the ground when your dog stands. Trim a little every couple of weeks. You can use nail clippers made for dogs, a Dremel-style grinder or scratch boards.^{8,9} If you're hesitant to do it yourself, ask your groomer or vet for help (or even a quick nail-trimming lesson). Some dogs are very nervous and may need antianxiety medication or calming herbal remedies in order to trim their nails. Working with your pet frequently at home will help them get used to having their paws touched and nails trimmed.

2. **Moisturize and protect** — Cold weather, salt, and dry air make nails brittle. Paw balms and natural salves with ingredients like calendula, myrrh, or horsetail can help keep nails hydrated.
3. **Nutrition boosts** — Food is medicine for nails, too. Consider adding protein-rich foods (like eggs, meat, and fish) for overall nail health and feeding a raw or fresh food diet for the best nutrient bioavailability. Foods rich in collagen, like homemade (onion-free) bone broth help strengthen nails as well, especially in aging dogs. Biotin and omega-3 supplements also support skin, coat, and nails.¹⁰ You may also consider adding a supplement or foods containing zinc which is an important mineral for nail health.
4. **Exercise and wear** — Regular walks on pavement naturally wear nails down and prevent overgrowth.
5. **Check breed risks** — If you have a breed known for nail problems, be extra proactive with trimming and vet checkups.

For dewclaws, special care is needed. These claws don't touch the ground, so they don't wear down naturally. They're also more likely to snag and split. Keep them trimmed short and check often. In rare cases, vets may recommend surgical removal if they repeatedly cause problems. This is most likely to be an issue with dewclaws on the hind legs which can get snagged more easily. Hind leg dewclaws are more common in certain breeds such as Great Pyrenees.¹¹

Nails Are a Window Into Your Pet's Health

Your dog's nails aren't just for digging or scratching — they can tell you a lot about overall health. Weak, brittle, or repeatedly splitting nails can be early warning signs of infection, allergies, or internal disease. Paying attention to paw health can help you catch bigger problems early.

Split nails may seem like a small problem compared to other health issues, but for your dog, they can be a big source of pain. With regular nail care, proper nutrition, and a watchful eye, you can help prevent splits from happening in the first place.

So next time your pup is flying around the yard in a fit of zoomies, you can rest a little easier knowing their paws are strong, their nails are healthy, and those zoomies won't turn into ouchies.

Sources and References

^{1,3,6,9} [WebMD, August 20, 2024](#)
^{2,4,5,8,11} [Vet Help Direct, August 26, 2025](#)
^{7,10} [Whole Dog Journal, April 17, 2023](#)
