

TOENAIL TRIMMING 101

by Kathy Peterson



Overgrowth of toenails is a common disorder of the camelid foot. Routine care of camelids should include the regular trimming of toenails. This subject is rarely addressed in care pamphlets except for some vague reference such as “trim the toenails.”

Camelids usually have few problems with their feet or legs; however, problems can be created if the owner does not perform routine toenail inspection and trimming when needed. An owner must be willing to perform this maintenance – or have someone do it for them - along with vaccinations, dewormings and other routine health care. Here are some things that occur if toenails are not trimmed:

- The natural gait of the camelid will change. In an effort to accommodate nails that are too long and/or curved, the animal will throw the feet, both front and rear.
- The animal may also toe in, but more than likely will toe out. He may “rockback” on his pasterns to relieve the discomfort, which may lead to permanent damage to the pasterns and fetlocks.
- Toenails, which are too long, will, over time, cause the animal to

develop joint pain, arthritis and lameness.

- Worst of all, and simply put, the animal will suffer.

The following is a photograph of a llama that is permanently crippled from toenails left untrimmed. He was sheared and had his toenails trimmed when he was six years old. He had had neither since birth.



All animals grow nails at different rates. Some will need to be trimmed every six weeks or so. Others will require trimming once or twice a year. Still others may not need their nails trimmed at all. If you have some rocky areas in your pasture or barn floors with rough finish concrete, then you will trim less often. Even though toenails are exposed to areas that naturally trim them, still you will find that some animals’ toenails grow

faster than others and require regular trimming. Also, the front and rear toenails of individual animals may wear differently.

Owners should use common sense when choosing times to inspect and trim toenails. Avoid nail trimming during hot weather. Don’t trim nails of pregnant females during late gestation or juveniles that are in the already stressful situation of being weaned. Nails are easier to trim early in the morning following overnight

dew or after a rain, when they are damp and more pliable.

The goal is to make the toenail trimming process stress free and comfortable for the animal and for you. As we all know, these animals don't forget bad experiences! "Calm" and "slow" are the words to remember. Talking quietly to your animal throughout the procedure will help both of you relax.

The Nail Trimming Process

- Restrain your camelid. With patience and proper training, many camelids become accustomed to the nail trimming process and require little/no restraint. If necessary, use a chute specifically designed for camelids. Many owners do this anyway to provide more stability for the camelid and owner alike.
- Use nail clippers that are suitable for the job. These can be purchased from most livestock supply stores.



- Decide which nails you will trim first (right or left front, right or left rear). Position yourself beside the animal, facing toward his rear. Depending upon how accustomed he is to having his nails trimmed, you may be able to give the command, "Foot," and have him lift his foot for you. This is the perfect world situation and is rare. Usually, you will talk calmly to your camelid, slowly run your hand down his leg to his foot and then gently bend his leg upward at the knee, so the bottom of his foot pad is facing you.
- Keep the foot in alignment with the body. Avoid pulling the foot out to the side. Doing this keeps pressure off the animal's joints and makes the

experience more comfortable. Allowing the animal to maintain its balance avoids placing undue stress and struggling on him and on you.

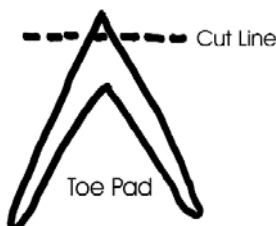
- Before you begin trimming, examine the nail and the pad. Use the tip of your nail clippers to gently remove any excess dirt in crevices around and between the pad and the nails.

Toe, Viewed From Underneath



- Lift and trim the sides of each nail. You may prefer starting at the back of the nail or at the front. Choose the method that lets you maintain maximum control over the clippers.
- Once you have trimmed the edges of each nail, remove the point by trimming directly across the tip of the nail perpendicular to the direction of the nail. *Note: Some prefer to trim the tip of the nail first and then trim the sides.*

Toe, Viewed From Underneath



- If the animal's nails are overgrown, trim the sides and the tips as far as you can without causing bleeding. In these cases, you will need to trim the nails every couple of weeks until you achieve the desired result. If the animal's nails have been neglected and are extremely overgrown, you may be unable to achieve a "normal" look, even with repeated trimmings.

- Finish the trimming process by carefully inspecting the tips of the nails and finish shaping them by trimming them at an angle.
- Repeat the entire process for all feet.

Trimmed nails should have slightly rounded tips.

Properly Trimmed Nails



Be careful to avoid the soft tissue or quick as cutting it could cause bleeding and pain to your camelid. If you are inexperienced at nail trimming, be conservative with the amount of nail you trim. You also might ask an experienced person to assist until you feel comfortable with the process.

If you do cut the soft tissue, cleanse with betadine (iodine). The llama standing on the area will apply the needed pressure to stop the bleeding. If you are too nervous to allow this, apply styptic powder. A deep cut could develop an infection and/or cause crippling.

So that's it – nail trimming 101! With a little preparation, patience and practice, anyone can learn to trim nails properly.