

## Thought for paws...

A dog's paws are remarkable structures: compact, resilient, and essential to movement. Despite this, they are often overlooked in routine care. Regular inspection of paws and nails isn't just about hygiene; it plays a key role in maintaining mobility, preventing injury, and supporting long-term joint health.

A paw is a work of art and evolution. It's a complex system made up of bones, joints, ligaments, tendons, and specialized pads. These pads act as natural shock absorbers, cushioning impact as a dog walks, runs, or jumps. They also provide traction, helping dogs maintain stability across a range of surfaces from grass and gravel to polished floors.

When paws are healthy, movement is smooth and efficient. When they are not, even small issues can affect how a dog moves and place strain on the rest of the body.

One of the most common, and preventable, causes of mobility

problems is poor nail care. A dog's nails should be short enough that they do not touch the ground when standing. Dew claws also need trimming, as they do not wear down naturally and can easily catch on objects.

Overgrown nails force the toes to splay unnaturally, changing how weight is distributed through the paw. Over time, this altered posture can affect the carpus, elbow, and shoulder in the front limbs, and the hocks and hips in the hind limbs. Long nails are also more likely to split or tear, which can be painful and slow to heal.

Paw pads also need regular attention. While tough, they are not indestructible. Pads can become dry and cracked, burn on hot pavement, or suffer cuts and abrasions from rough or icy terrain. Urban environments add further risks, including broken glass, discarded can tabs, and road grit. Small objects such as grass seeds, thorns, or stones can also become lodged between the toes, leading to irritation or infection.

Regular checks help catch these issues early. A quick inspection after walks can reveal redness, swelling, discharge, or signs of discomfort such as licking or limping. Addressing problems early often prevents the need for more serious veterinary treatment.

For example, I once found old chewing gum lodged between the pads of a dog I regularly massage, highlighting just how easily hidden hazards can be missed without routine checks.

Another often-overlooked factor is the fur between the paw pads. In some breeds, this hair can grow long and reduce traction. On smooth surfaces like tiles or wooden floors, this increases the risk of slipping. Keeping this hair trimmed improves grip and stability.

Paw health is also closely linked to proprioception, the body's ability to sense position and movement. Dogs rely heavily on feedback from their paws to coordinate movement. If the paws are sore or compromised, this feedback loop is disrupted.

Paw care is especially important for working and athletic dogs, as they place greater demands on their feet. In these dogs, small issues can quickly become more serious if left unaddressed.

Incorporating paw checks into a regular grooming routine doesn't need to be time-consuming. A few minutes spent examining each paw, trimming nails as needed, and ensuring the pads are clean and intact can make a substantial difference. For dogs that are sensitive about having their feet handled, gradual desensitisation paired with reflexology and positive reinforcement, help build tolerance over time.

Regular paw care helps prevent injury, supports healthy movement, and ensures that dogs remain active and mobile for as long as possible. 🐾

*This column represents the author's reflections on her interaction with the dog world and does not necessarily reflect any official position of Dogs New Zealand.*

