

Monitor Lizard Nails

How do I clip my monitor lizard's nails?

By Margaret A. Wissman, DVM, DABVP

I live in South Africa where there are no specialized reptile veterinarians that can assist me with my monitor lizard (*Varanus albigularis*) problem. I would like to clip or trim my monitor lizard's nails. Is there a certain way I could clip my monitor lizard's nails, or do the arteries or veins run to the tips of the nails? My arms are all scratched from my monitor lizard, and it is pretty painful. Can you please give me advice?

I can certainly understand why you are interested in having your monitor lizard's nails trimmed, as scratches, even if unintentional on the part of your monitor lizard, can result in quite painful abrasions. Because they are caused by a reptile, such as your monitor lizard, there is always a concern about bacteria being introduced to the skin.

There is a blood supply to each nail of your monitor lizard, but at the tip of the nail, there should be a length of dead horny nail tissue that extends beyond the vessel. Because monitor lizard nails are dark, you won't be able to visualize where the blood supply ends and, therefore, where it is safe to clip the nails. But, with a little experience, you should be able to safely clip your monitor lizard's nails without causing the nails to bleed.

I would recommend using a toenail clipper, to be used solely for your monitor lizard, to nip off the sharp tips of each nail, removing just a millimeter or two to begin with. Then you can use a disposable emery board or a metal nail file (designated just for use by your monitor lizard) to file and round off the cut tips. You may need another person to help you perform this so that your monitor lizard doesn't wiggle, which could result in you cutting off more nail than you had planned.

If possible, perhaps a dog or cat veterinarian can help you the first time, if you can find one willing to show you the proper way to clip your monitor lizard's nails. You might be able to locate a veterinarian with a special interest in reptiles who would be happy to help you with your monitor lizard. Also, a veterinarian would have some sort of clotting agent available if your monitor lizard's nail is inadvertently clipped too short. You might also be able to ask an avian veterinarian to help you, because they routinely clip bird nails for their clients' safety and comfort, and there are similarities between bird and lizard nails.