

Grooming Your Dog

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Why do you need to groom your dog?

There are a many reasons why you should groom your dog. It stimulates the production of oil in the dog's coat, keeping it shiny and helping to prevent it from becoming dry and brittle. These oils are also good for skin health, and can provide a water-proofing function. Most dogs also enjoy it, and it forms an integral part of bonding with your dog, reassuring its sense of belonging to your pack. It is also a great way to help monitor your dog's health - brushing and stroking will help you notice any lumps and bumps, grass seeds, rashes, and wounds that may need attention. Another great advantage to grooming is that the more hair you remove through brushing outside, the less hair you have to contend with on your clothing, floor, and furniture. This is particularly important when dogs are shedding their coats during a moult. If the shedding is allowed to progress at its own pace, which can take several weeks, large drifts of hair can rapidly accumulate in the house. Brushing can remove the dead hair much more rapidly and the sooner it is gone the sooner your dog will be back to looking its best.



How do you do it?

Although most dogs seem to enjoy being groomed, for those that are likely to get knots and tangles, or require clipping and scissoring, it can be a little more demanding. Make sure you practice positive reinforcement principles right from when your dog is a puppy, or grooming may end up turning into a bit of a struggle of wills. If you take it slowly, step by step, and offer lots of encouragement and rewards, you should both get a lot of pleasure out of the process. Make sure you are also both in a comfortable position for grooming. This means having your dog at a height where you are not bending or reaching uncomfortably, perhaps on a bench or table, and provide your dog with a non-slip surface (maybe a mat) so they can be sure of their footing.

For most coats you should brush in the direction of the hair beginning with the head, shoulders, and neck, working down the body to the legs and to the tail. With long coarse coats that have a soft short undercoat, and short coarse Terrier coats, the undercoat can be brushed against the grain to help lift and fluff the coat before brushing the top coat with the direction of the hair. With long coats it is best to divide the coat into sections and brush from the skin out. Some groomers use rubber bands and clips to hold sections of hair out of the way while they complete another section, helping them to make sure that each section is free of tangles.

Long-haired dogs and particularly those that have constantly growing coats which do not moult out, such as Poodles, need more than just brushing and combing to keep them healthy. Some will need clipping to keep their coats in check, and without regular attention, vision may become impaired (hair growing long over eyes), grass-seeds may get caught between toes and possibly pierce the skin causing abscesses, faeces may mat the hair causing health and hygiene problems, and in extreme cases, a dog may even drown while swimming when an excessively long coat gets wet.

If you find that your dog has some severe mats, the only solution may be to cut them out, and in some cases it may be safer to enlist the help of a vet or professional groomer to remove severe mats to avoid accidentally cutting the skin. Smaller mats can be teased out with slicker brushes or mat breakers but this can sometimes be very time consuming and uncomfortable for the dog. In the long run you may save yourself more time by dedicating a short time each day, or at least several times a week, to grooming a long haired dog. Tangle free sprays may make the task of removing mats easier.

There are many grooming tools on the market, and it can be a little confusing, so here is an explanation for the uses of some of the most common ones:

Bristle Brushes - These are pretty general purpose brushes, and can be used for most coat types. They are generally available in soft, medium, and firm, and with short or long bristles that can be closely or widely spaced. Soft to medium are generally used for soft coats, with short closely spaced bristles for the soft, short coats and wider spaced, longer bristles for the soft long coats. Firmer bristle brushes are used for wire coats, such as Terrier coats, and long coats that have a coarse outer coat, such as Collies and Old English Sheepdogs. Again, short closely spaced bristles are used on the shorter coats and longer widely spaced bristles are used for the longer coats.



Wire Pin Brushes - Most often used for medium to long fine or coarse coats. They are useful for removing dead undercoat, particularly when moulting.



Combs - Generally used after brushing to remove more dead and loose hair. Many have wider pins at one end and closer pins at the other end. Always begin by using the wider end of the comb to avoid pulling out hair if you hit a tangle that hasn't been removed by brushing.



Slicker Brushes - These have short fine metal teeth that are useful in teasing out mats in medium to long coats. The idea is to break up mats that involve the outer coat first before tackling mats that are close to the skin involving the undercoat.



Mat Breakers, De-matting Combs, Stripping Combs or Knives, and Coat Rakes

These may have replaceable blades and are designed to help break up hair mats so that they can be more easily removed. These are also used to thin the coats of some wire haired breeds, such as the Airedale Terrier, and dogs that have their body haired thinned along their backs for the showing, such as Schnauzers and West Highland White Terriers. It is best to have these demonstrated by an experienced groomer as removing hair mats and stripping the coat can cause damage to the coat and be painful to the dog, if not done properly. Undercoat rakes are designed to penetrate the outer coat without damage to remove dead hair from the undercoat.



Rubber Brushes and Grooming Mitts

These brushes do not have bristles but have raised rubber nodules instead. They are most suited to very smooth coated dogs and are effective at grabbing dead hair and removing it from the coat. Some owners use them on wet dogs to remove the dead hair loosened during their bath. The mitts are particularly good if your dog is nervous about brushes as it is a more subtle transition from stroking to brushing.

Scissors and Clippers

Like professional hairdressers, people who groom dogs professionally generally use expensive, top quality scissors and clippers in order to cut and shape the coat to an even finish without damage. If your dog requires regular clipping you may want to invest in some good equipment and learn to clip and trim properly. There are videos and books available to help you learn. If less frequent clipping is required it may be better to leave it to a professional. Shaving is not recommended for most breeds as it removes the undercoat which many breeds rely on for insulation. It also exposes the dog's skin to sunburn.