

MATTED DOGS - WHAT'S THE FUSS ALL ABOUT?



Very often dogs will come in for grooming who are matted and owners will ask -

“Can you just brush him out? I want to keep the length”



Underneath the fluffy exterior, this dog is very matted. Often affected dogs are those with wavy or curly coats eg doodles such as Cockerpoos, Labradoodles and Golden Doodles but others include the Schnauzer, Shih Tzus, Lasa Apsos and Bichons. All dogs who grow a decent length of hair can get matted and yes, it is a problem. A problem more than just a tangled coat.

Although tangles may appear cosmetic, mats can pose a real health concern to dogs. Failure to thoroughly brush out the coat can lead to the build up of mats close to the skin that cannot be brushed out without causing the dog distress and pain as well as:

- Skin irritation caused by dirt and dander
- Parasites such as fleas, ticks and even maggots may become trapped under the hair and cause skin infections
- Sores and hair loss - as mats become tighter, they can pull on the skin, causing lesions and hair loss. These skin lesions can become entry points for bacteria.
- Mats can obstruct the skin and hide conditions such as hot spots, sores and other skin issues. These can only be revealed once the hair has been clipped off and may need treatment.
- Mats struggle to dry out and can become very smelly; also all kinds of liquids, including urine and faeces can soak into them
- The skin beneath tight mats is usually raw and inflamed
- Ear bleeding - if the ears are heavily matted, circulation can be restricted. Once the mats have been removed, the dog may feel 'tingling' as the circulation returns and may shake their heads excessively, causing bleeding.
- De-matting of younger pets tends to make them dislike grooming to the point that they become VERY difficult to work with, and may even become biters, requiring them to be muzzled in order for them to be groomed at all.
- When a dog is severely tangled or matted, it causes greater stress on the dog to be de-matted. Since your pet has no way of telling us that we are hurting him/her, their only alternative is to bite.

Note that just because you take your dog to a groomer does NOT mean you should not brush your dog in between. Not only are you opening up your dog to the issues above but the dog will soon learn to hate going to the groomer, could become difficult and get on the 'banned dog' list!!

WHY AND HOW DO MATS FORM?

So mats can cause all kinds of issues but before answering the question 'can't you just brush it out?', the structure of a mat and reason for its' formation must be understood as this makes it all clear.



Mats are tangled fur but they are more than just a simple knot that you can comb through as you might in your own hair. Instead they are more like dreadlocks, dense and solid - could you imagine a hairdresser just brushing out dreadlocks? It would be really painful, could tear the skin on your scalp and you wouldn't feel particularly nice thoughts toward them! You wouldn't bite the hairdresser but sometimes dogs feel that is their only option to ask you to stop what you're doing.

Dogs have two different types of hair in their coat, the soft undercoat and the thicker top coat or guard hairs. Usually the undercoat is lighter in colour, often grey or grey/brown and lacks the shine of the topcoat. Even short coated dogs have undercoat and can moult tremendously - Pugs and Rottweilers leave hair everywhere and a friend who has several says they form 'tumbleweeds' in her kitchen! The difficulty longer haired dogs have is that either they do not naturally shed their hair and it just keeps growing (as is the case with the Poodle, who has fur more like human hair in a single layer), or they do shed this undercoat and it gets tangled in the other longer hairs and cannot be shed without the help from a brush.

In the wild, the undercoat would have been pulled out with twigs or brambles but of course this doesn't happen in our homes and so the undercoat builds up. This means our job is to keep the undercoat tangle free until shedding time (usually twice a year) when the undercoat gets released - and boy if you own a Husky type breed or German Shepherd, you know ALL about this time of year!!



Masses of undercoat is trying to come out, and it can be a very hard job to get it all without ending up with a tangled dog. Often owners of such dogs book them into the groomer every quarter to keep on top of it as the tools in the salon do a much better job - and save your arms!



Imagine all this undercoat getting tangled up in your dog's coat!!

The other issue is that the undercoat in fact can be a major proportion of the dog's coat. Unlike human hair follicles, which give one hair each, dog's follicles produce multiple hairs - usually a single guard hair (or topcoat hair), multiple undercoat hairs and the next guard hair waiting to come out.

The undercoat hairs are usually softer and fluffier, which means that they can be more prone to tangling and of course the greater the proportion of undercoat, the more needs to be shed.

Curly coated dogs are prone to matting partly because firstly the coat forms tight curls which can exacerbate tangling but also because when the hair falls out (and it does fall out like human hair) this then gets stuck in the curly coat.

When Poodles are bred to dogs with the normal structure of a top coat and fluffy undercoat, this means that not only are there hairs which continually grow and are likely to get stuck in the coat, but the shedding undercoat also gets stuck and wads up into mats. This is particularly a problem when the coat changes from puppy to adult coat and owners suddenly find that their lovely, easy to manage Cockerpoo has become a matted nightmare.

Even if you do keep your dog's coat in good condition, there are 'danger areas' and these tend to be those with high friction as the back and forth motion, or rubbing of the collar and harness tangles up the fur on a daily basis. Areas to really keep track of are armpits, the collar area, behind the ears and thighs and the groin area as well as longer hair on legs and skirt if they are left to grow. Many dogs dislike being groomed here, particularly if the coat is tangled or they've had pulling and tugging there so if you've got a puppy, get them used to being brushed *everywhere* and not just on their back.



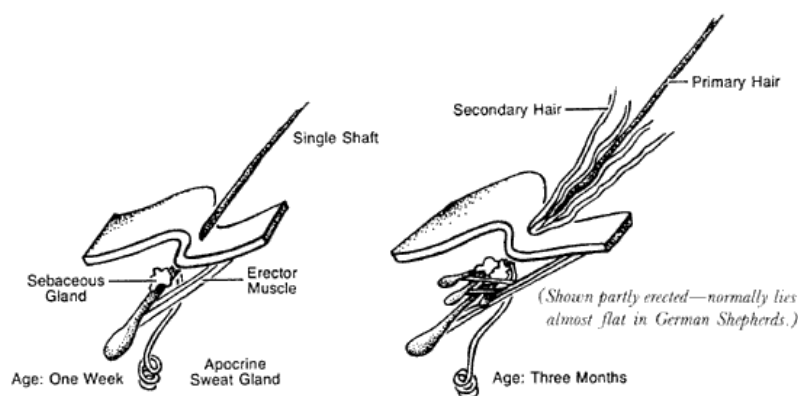
Paws and between the pads get matted too - this can be like walking on stones for the dog so keep them trimmed and regularly check for mats and other foreign particles such as grass seeds.

For guidance on getting your puppy used to being handled and groomed, please see my other article.

HOW DO YOU GET RID OF MATS?

You can't brush them out without causing the dog a great deal of discomfort and pain because the undercoat wraps around the longer hairs and wads up, forming a type of felt or fleece. Not only this, but the more you try and brush it out, the more the dog will resent it and resort to telling you in the only way he can - with his teeth. It's simply not fair to put him through it. You can, however, deal with minor tangles and snares fairly easily - ask your groomer to show you how to properly brush your dog, and have a look at my article on caring for your dog's coat at home. Be VERY wary of so-called 'mat splitters' as they are sharp and can further damage the coat, leaving it fuzzy and even more prone to tangling. Similarly, avoid attempting to cut out mats unless you've been shown the best tool and the best way of doing it.

More extensive matting results in the dog having to be shaved like a sheep and the coat comes off in great pieces just like a fleece - imagine how tight and restrictive this must have felt to the dog; it must have been like running around in a straightjacket:



Hair Follicles. Accessory hairs develop as the puppy gets close to 3 months old, at which time there are two to five secondary hairs around each primary hair. At six months there are five to fifteen in each follicle bundle, further grouped in clusters of three in irregular rows, 100 to 300 bundles per square centimeter.



The good news is that your dog's coat will grow back, and will probably grow back in a better condition than if the groomer tries to brush out the mats - if that were even possible. Within no time the new healthy coat will come through and provided you maintain the coat care in between grooms, you'll be able to have the length you desire within 2-3 grooming cycles.

Although you may not like the look of your dog with such short hair, it will grow back fast and in the meantime, don't treat your dog any differently - they don't know they look strange to you.

Please know that as groomers we do not want to shave off every dog; we take pride in making the dogs look as good as possible, and we want to create a style you like that is also practical for you and your dog.

Talk to your groomer about your lifestyle, where the dog is walked and how much time you realistically have to groom them - if you are busy running around after a family, walk your dog in an area full of mud and undergrowth, you may need to consider a slightly shorter haircut for your dog's wellbeing and so that you can manage it.

[HELP - I DO BRUSH MY DOG BUT HE KEEPS GETTING MATS!](#)

One of the most frustrating things to an owner is to brush your dog but he still ends up being clipped down short because of matting. This usually occurs when owners are brushing the dog, but not getting right down to the skin, where the mats are forming. To look at and to gently stroke, the coat looks fine but deep down there are tight mats forming a layer or pelt next to the skin.

To correctly brush your dog, you need to have the right equipment and be shown what to do with it - please read my articles on equipment and on how to care for your dog's coat at home. Also ask the groomer to show you how to brush your dog in order to keep tangles down, and you'll be able to have a beautifully groomed dog with a haircut to be proud of!

