

Grooming Basics

No matter what your mother said, it's not just what's on the inside that counts--not, at least, when it comes to canine care. Your dog's health and happiness also are dependent upon a well-care-for exterior--coat, ears, mouth and nails.

Show dogs and those with special grooming problems (severely matted hair, hard-to-groom ears and infected gums, to name a few) need the attention and skills of a veterinarian or professional groomer. But you easily can give your dog routine every-day care at home.

Regular brushing helps eliminate tangles and mats and helps your dog get accustomed to being handled. It also gives you the opportunity to check for ticks and fleas, lesions, lumps and changes in his skin and coat. Pet-supply stores and catalogs sell a wide array of brushes for different coats and conditions.

Slicker brushes have a bed of fine, closely spaced wires that usually are hooked or bent; they're good all-purpose brushes for removing mats, loose hair and debris.

Pin brushes have a bed of widely spaced tines that look like straight pins. The tines sometimes are tipped with plastic. Pin brushes are also good for removing tangles but can be uncomfortable for grooming shorthaired dogs.

Bristle brushes and metal combs are used in the final grooming step for longhaired dogs, leaving their hair sleek, smooth and shiny. A bristle brush may be the only brush you'll need for a shorthaired dog.

Begin the brushing process with a slicker or pin brush to remove dead hair, debris and tangles. For breeds with long and very thick coats, you should groom with both brushes, using the slicker brush first.

For tough tangles, gently comb or brush small sections at a time, giving yourself and your dog a break every few minutes. Be careful not to tug at or tear the hair.

After the coat is smooth, give your dog a final brushing with a bristle brush (for shorthaired dogs) or a comb (for longhaired dogs). Give plenty of praise during the brushing process and reward your dog with a treat when you're finished.

Bath time is much easier after a thorough brushing. Place your dog in a tub or a basin with a nonskid surface. Hold your dog's collar firmly, then slowly pour several pitchers of lukewarm water over his body, being careful to leave the head dry.

Soap your dog's body with a dog shampoo, then massage the soap into a lather, talking to your dog and praising him as you work. When his body is lathered, move to his head, being careful to keep shampoo out of his eyes, ears and mouth.

Rinse and dry your dog's head, then rinse his body. When the water runs clear, rinse one more time.

Thoroughly dry your dog with towels. If your dog has healthy skin, you can dry him further with a hair dryer set on low or warm temperature.

Bathe smaller dogs such as poodles and schnauzers every two or three weeks, except in the winter when once a month probably will do. Larger pets need bathing several times a year. Of course, always wash a pet when it is dirty or smells, regardless of when it was last bathed.

Proper foot care will keep your doggie dancing and help prevent unnecessary pain and infection later on. Most dogs don't like to have their feet handled, so go slowly--one paw at a time--and make foot handling a part of playtime.

Remove mats of hair from between the toes and pads of dogs with hairy feet; if ignored, the mats can become as hard as rocks. Then, using scissors, trim the hair between the pads and between the toes so it is level with the dog's foot.

Regular exercise on a hard surface may keep a dog's nails worn down. However, most domestic dogs will need to have their nails clipped every few weeks. If your dog has dewclaws (the smaller claw on the back of each leg, higher than the paws), those always will need clipping. If the nails or dewclaws are allowed to grow, they may curl inward into the skin and cause a painful infection.

Use nail clippers designed specifically for dogs. One type, known as the guillotine style, has a round opening for the dog's nail and a blade that slides across to clip the nail. Another type works like a pair of scissors. This type puts less pressure on the nail and is more comfortable for the dog. Make sure the blades are sharp.

Trim only the "hook" end of the nail. Clipping a nail to short can be painful and may cause bleeding. Frequent trimming of a small amount of nail always is better than waiting until the nail is long. Never trim into the quick -- the live portion of the nail.

Ear care generally is the easiest grooming task. Unless your dog has ear problems or spends time hunting and swimming, ear cleaning needs to be done only every few weeks--at bath time is best.

Clean the outermost area of your dog's ears with a cotton ball or cotton swab dampened with water or baby oil. To clean further inside the ears and soften and remove wax, use an ear-cleaning solution.

Warm the bottle of solution between your palms, then squirt the prescribed amount into your dog's ear canal. Gently massage the base of his ear. Remove any dirt or wax with a dry cotton ball.