

A home grooming routine - everyday wellness inspection

Home grooming is an opportunity to deepen your relationship with your pet & conduct a basic wellness inspection. The foundation of grooming out is brushing, to effectively manage its coat between visits to a professional groomer.

Correct brushing = the right tools + the right technique

Every part of the coat must be systematically groomed out – brushing & combing down to the skin, to remove loose & dead hair which would otherwise become trapped amongst healthy, growing hair. This is the ONLY way to prevent tangles, knots & matts. Brushing & combing in this way also allows you to monitor the health of your dog's skin – the largest organ of its body.

Tool 1: Brush

Slickers are generally the most effective types of brushes to break the coat apart without causing mechanical damage to hair. Caution should be exercised not to scratch the skin. Brushstrokes should be short & rapid, working upwards from the ends to the roots with each stroke.

Tool 2: Comb

Use a long toothed anti-static comb – Teflon coated or metal (not plastic) with some wide or medium spaced teeth & some closely spaced teeth. Teeth an inch or longer are ideal. Without scraping the skin, comb the hair all the way out from roots to ends.

A brush can pass over knots, tangles or matts, but a comb will find them. A comb is the most effective way to check brushing technique.

Technique: Line Brushing

Start at a foot, separating & holding back all but an inch of coat with your free hand. Use your working hand to brush the inch section of coat – starting at the hair ends, working gradually up the hair shaft towards the root & skin in short, rapid, repeated brushstrokes. Work systematically up the leg, releasing sections of hair an inch at a time. Line brush each leg. Next, line brush the body – one side at a time, working from the rear upwards to the neck. Line brush out the collar area all the way around the neck, up to the base of the ears. To brush behind ears, hold an ear forward over the cheek & brush out small sections of ear coat in the opposite direction towards the back & tail), then the ear furnishings around the perimeter of the ear leather, before brushing the rest of the coat covering the leather. Systematically work from the back of the head forward & all the way around, to line brush out the top of the head, cheeks & muzzle area. Depending on the size of the dog & coat length/density line brushing a well-managed coat should take no longer than between 5-15 minutes at most.

My dog won't allow me to handle it in this way ...

If your dog is unaccustomed to being handled for grooming out or wellness inspection, begin with 'gentling' – firm but calm & persistent gentle handling, massaging & palpating. Start with short sessions – as little as 5 minutes for the first few days – everyday. During handling & grooming positively reinforce every desirable behaviour with a small but highly desirable titbit & calm praise without overfussing. Ignore all undesirable behaviours, correcting your dog's position if necessary & persist with the gentling session. Next, introduce grooming tools by gently touching & stroking your pet with them, all over the body. Positively reinforce every desirable behaviour.

You are teaching your dog **The Grooming Game** – one which you manage & lead. Your dog will learn to tolerate being handled for grooming or veterinary examination.

With handling control you are teaching your dog to sit & stand appropriately during the game. To aid learning, confine grooming to a designated quiet area to allow it to concentrate without distraction. A leash attached to a wall hook or a door handle will safely restrain it & keep it immobilised.

Better still, confine your dog to a tabletop for grooming. Ensure that restraint is safe, controlled & supervised at all times. Table training may take patience, time & practice. Positive reinforcement will help to accelerate learning.

Your dog should begin to enjoy being handled this way within a few days & look forward to playing the game. As your dog's enjoyment of the game increases, progress to brushing out every part of its coat.

Pay particular attention to brushing out the following often neglected areas where the coat is prone to matting:

- Behind the ears
- Collar area
- Ruff & furnishings
- Sides of the body
- 'Armpits'
- Rear inner thighs & groin
- Undercarriage
- Sanitary/genital area
- Base of tail & length of tail
- Legs – if necessary 'anchor' each leg by holding it firmly with your free hand above the elbow or top of thigh while brushing it out with your working hand.
- Feet – lift then firmly but gently hold the 'wrist' or 'ankle' area to properly brush out the tops of the feet before combing out coat between the toes & then underneath, between the pads.
- Nails - even if you do not trim them yourself, gently handle & inspect each one, including any dew claws. Neglected nail overgrowth causes extreme discomfort or pain & can have detrimental consequences to a dog's quality of life. Nails need to be trimmed regularly if they are not naturally ground down through exercise on rough, abrasive surfaces like tarmac or paving.
- Eyes & ears - Wipe around eyes to keep them clear them of discharge, which can become infected. If necessary, gently wipe clean the insides of ears with a piece of cotton wool dampened with witch hazel (a mild, natural astringent) or an ear cleaning solution.
- Mouth & teeth - Inspect teeth & the inside the mouth by gently massaging & lifting the flews.
- Sanitary & Genital areas - inspect & if necessary, wipe clean regularly to maintain hygiene.

As the coat grows & the ends of the hair dry out or split you may find it more difficult to keep tangles & knots at bay. Leave-in conditioner or detangling solution spritzed through the coat & left to dry before brushing out can help to smooth the cuticles of the hair until your dog's coat can be professionally trimmed to a more manageable length.