

Grooming

Beyond beauty: grooming for good health by Eve Adamson

You already know that grooming makes your dog look lovely and smell sweet. But grooming is also one of the most important things you can do to maintain your dog's good health. Regular grooming is a bit like a light version of a veterinary exam. That makes it extra important, not just for keeping your pup pretty but as the best possible way for you to establish what's physically normal for your dog. Every time you put comb to coat, you have the chance to assess your dog's ongoing health and detect any sudden changes in skin, coat, eyes, ears, nose, rear, paws, nails, joints, or generalised pain. If anything changes, you'll be the first to notice.

Once-over rubdown

An all-over rubdown is a great way to begin every grooming session. It loosens dead coat, increases circulation in the skin, relaxes your dog for grooming – and it's also an important skin check. Lumps, bumps, rough patches, sores, or bare spots in the coat may be missed if you aren't actually putting your hands on your dog in a methodical way. This is also an excellent way to determine whether your dog has picked up any ticks or fleas.

The once-over will alert you to other changes too. If your dog has a sore knee, hip, elbow, or shoulder, he may flinch or yelp in pain when you touch or rub him in that particular spot. If you find a lump, a sore spot, a bare patch, or anything else unusual and new, let your veterinarian know. Please don't balk at telling the vet about a lump or bump because you're afraid it might be cancer. It may be just a harmless, benign cyst. Or if it is, for example, a mast cell tumor – a common type of cancer that often manifests as a bump on the skin – early detection and treatment almost always result in complete recovery.

Orifice inspection

It may not be the most pleasant chore, but gazing into your dogs' eyes - and ears, nose, mouth, and rear end – is also an important part of a grooming health check. Problems often show up in these sensitive areas. Yeasty ear infections, gum disease, tooth decay, dry eye, impacted anal glands, even worms, are just some of the conditions that can be spotted visually. Call your vet if you notice any of the following:

- Red, rashy ears
- Excessive ear hair, with clumps of wax and dirt
- Runny nose

- Foul breath
- Red, infected areas on gums
- Tartar on teeth
- Loose or broken teeth
- Red, irritated eyes
- Excessively runny, watery eyes, or tearstains under eyes
- Redness, rash, or sores around the rear end
- Any foreign substance (flea dirt, tiny worms, or anything unusual) around the rear.

Now hair this!

After checking your dog thoroughly, the next step in regular grooming is usually brushing or combing the coat. If you have a long-coated breed, this very important step can help you spot skin problems you might not be able to detect with your hands. Don't just brush the top layer of hair: if your dog is having any kind of skin problem, it will be down at the roots, so that's where you have to look. Combing all the way down to the skin can reveal hot spots and skin infections hidden under mats and tangles. You might also find evidence of fleas or an attached tick.

Regular brushing can also be a great way to assess a short-coated dog's overall health. As you brush, feel and examine the state of your dogs' skin and coat. Is the skin smooth and supple, or dry and flaky? Is the coat soft and shiny, or dry and brittle? If your dog is eating a healthy, high-quality diet with sufficient essential fatty acids, his skin and coat should be in great condition. If you notice they are not, talk to your veterinarian. Sometimes, the very first sign of a health problem is as subtle as a dried-out coat and flaky skin.

Behaviour assessment

Beyond the actual hands-on aspects, grooming is also a special time to tune in to and bond with your dog. When you're busy all day, it can be easy to miss subtle signs that your pet's not feeling well. The best way to assess his behaviour during grooming is to minimise distractions. Turn off the television, the radio, the computer. Let grooming be the time when you focus on your dog, and nothing else. Without the normal distractions of life you may realise you've been noticing behavioural changes for a while, without really registering them.

Think about whether he's been eating and drinking as usual, playing in the usual way, sleeping or resting more. Has he been reluctant to go on walks? Acting confused? Hiding? Scratching a lot? Dragging his rear end around the carpet? Limping? Following you around more closely than usual, or not following you around in the usual way? Each of these may – or may not – be

a sign that your dog is experiencing the beginning stages of a health problem.

Veterinarians have often told me their clients were the first ones to spot the signs of serious health problems, such as cancer, skin infections, and even neurological conditions; in many cases, the pet owner spotted the first signs during a grooming session. You are the expert on your dog because you see him every day. Groom him daily, or at least weekly, so that if your dog does develop a healthy problem, you'll catch it and can have it treated