

Grooming Your Pets

By Sherry Woodard

Most animals can be taught to enjoy grooming at any age. Regular grooming will help you build and maintain healthy relationships with your pets, and practice gentle leadership skills. Another benefit of grooming is that you may notice a physical change that needs medical attention, something that might not have been obvious if you hadn't been grooming your pet. If you find any lumps, bumps or soreness, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian for a checkup.



Here are some supplies that you might need for grooming:

- Shampoo that is appropriate for the age and species of your pet (kittens and puppies need gentle shampoo; very young animals need products free of harsh pesticides; and ferrets should have ferret shampoo)
- Large cup or small bucket containing water, to create a nice lather
- Cotton balls
- Ear cleaner
- Parasite-control products (ask your veterinarian about what is needed in your area for fleas, ticks and mites)
- Metal comb
- Brush (there are many styles to choose from: pin, rake, slicker, mitt or curry)
- Nail trimmers (find the best size for your pet's nails)
- Nail file (some animals will actually sleep while their people file each toenail)
- Styptic powder (to use if you accidentally cut a nail too short)
- Ophthalmic ointment (used in the eyes to protect them from shampoo and debris)
- Detangler or conditioner (great for combing through long hair before a final rinse)
- Spray attachment for your shower (very helpful for rinsing your pet)
- A hair dryer (because some animals can chill easily, but be careful not to overheat the pet)
- Toothbrush and animal toothpaste
- Safety scissors for trimming hair
- Clippers (if you want to learn to style your pet)

One caution about clipping your pet: If you change the length of your pet's natural coat, he/she will need protection from the cold and the sun. (Pets can get sunburned!) Also, some coats do not grow back well, so I recommend that you consult a professional groomer if you want your pet to wear an un-natural style.

Start the grooming process by gently touching all the animal's body parts. If any parts seem sore, stop and schedule an appointment with your veterinarian for a checkup. If your pet seems uncomfortable with your touch, remember that animals learn positive associations with repetition and praise. You will need to be a kind, gentle leader but remain firm in your intentions. The plan is to teach your pet to enjoy being groomed and to groom your pet on a regular basis, not just when the animal is matted or really dirty.

If you need help, you can start by accompanying your pet to a professional groomer for a lesson. Choose a groomer who is patient, gentle and kind. Most groomers are thrilled to meet people who want to work with their animals in between professional grooming visits.

Here are some specifics about various aspects of grooming:

Brushing. Brushing and combing should happen daily or at least several times each week, no matter what kind of coat your animal has. If you plan to give your pet a bath, do the brushing part first. Brushing and combing will feel good to your pet; it removes dead hair and tangles, and distributes natural skin oils. If the coat is thick, make sure you are combing all the way to the skin. Be gentle and patient, though; too much pressure on the skin can cause irritation called brush burn, and pulling the tangles will hurt if you try to hurry. A detangler can be used on dry hair to loosen any knots.

Different types of brushes are used for different coats. A curved wire slicker or pin brush works well for long, straight coats. Use a regular wire slicker for medium-length hair and coats with a dense undercoat. I like rakes for brushing undercoats during the shedding season. Short, smooth coats can be brushed with a grooming mitt or rubber curry. After brushing, you can use an all-purpose comb to work out small knots the brush missed.

Baths. The water should be warm, even in summer, because very cold water can chill animals and leave your pet with a bad association to bathing in general. If you are bathing small animals, support them in the tub so they don't panic. Give your pet a full body massage while lathering up the shampoo, then rinse. If you wish, add conditioner and comb through the coat before a final rinse. I comb through long-haired dogs and horses' tails with conditioner before doing the final rinse. On cold days, all animals should be dried, and very young, old or sick animals should always be dried to prevent chilling.

Nails. Begin by picking up each foot and handling the nails. Then, without clipping, hold the clippers near a nail and squeeze the nail as though you are clipping. Look carefully for the quick – where the blood supply ends. You'll want to avoid cutting into the quick, since it is painful and will bleed. If you ever accidentally cut the quick, don't panic. Cover the nail end with your styptic powder and put pressure on the nail for 30 seconds, until it stops bleeding. Be gentle and patient with your pet. If you start by trimming one nail on each foot daily and rewarding with praise, you will soon have a relaxed, willing animal. Remember to also trim the dewclaws.

If you keep your pets' nails trimmed, you will protect their feet from long nails that can become caught and break off, causing pain. Long nails can also cause permanent damage to toes by bending them into unnatural positions. Animals with hooves need routine foot care by professionals, so make sure they are getting the care they need.

Teeth. You can gently massage the gums and brush the teeth on any pet – from the smallest rodents to the largest horses. If taught with patience and kindness, most animals enjoy a mouth massage. The benefits are healthy mouths and fresh breath. Plus, you'll be more aware of when your pet needs dental work by a professional, before your pet is in pain. Remember to use animal toothpaste appropriate for each type of pet.

Ears. You should periodically check your animal's ears. If they are clean and free of debris, then give your pet a nice ear rub. Again, a gentle massage is going to give your pet a good association to your touch. If the ears are dirty, smell bad or look sore, make an appointment with your veterinarian. The doctor can check for infection or parasites, and can get you started with a cleaning lesson.

If you are doing a quick cleaning to healthy ears, start by dampening a cotton ball with appropriate ear cleaner and wipe the folds of skin, starting near the head and cleaning out to the ends of the ear flaps. Do not use cotton swabs because they can reach too deeply inside the ear and cause damage. Some animals are sensitive to the feeling of the cleaner going in, so you might want to start with just a small amount. Be prepared to "wear" some ear cleaner, though, as most animals shake their heads and send it flying!

Grooming can be a pleasurable activity for both you and your pets. Enjoy your animal family members and the time you spend interacting with them.

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