

## BEHIND THE SCENES

### What is it really like to be a groomer?

Several professionals tell all

*By Kathy Diamond Davis*

Anyone who loves dogs has probably wondered about dog groomers. What does a dog experience at a grooming shop? Does the dog enjoy it? If you own a dog that requires professional grooming, or you're considering adopting such a dog, this article will help you understand groomers and what their jobs require.

#### Grooming Frequency

The groomers I talked to agreed that how often a dog is groomed depends on the individual dog and the care the owner provides at home. Some dogs never need to visit a professional groomer, but all dogs require grooming. Many dogs can be groomed at home by owners who have the time and skills.

Other dogs, however, requires lifelong, professional caliber clipping. The number of breeds and mixed breeds that need trimming is extensive. Groomers believe that the proper interval between clipping visits can be as short as one to two weeks, if the groomer does all the dog's grooming. At the other extreme, if you keep your dog in a short clip and comb it frequently, your dog can go as long as three months between visits. The average time between haircuts is four to eight weeks.

#### Is Grooming Painful?

Unless a dog suffers neglect at home, nothing at the grooming shop will cause the dog any pain. Your grooming duties at home depend on your dog's coat.

I learned about one type of coat when I adopted my American Eskimo, Angel, from an animal shelter. She was matted and filthy, and it took about an hour to comb and cut out mats. This was not a happy hour for her. As I worked I promised her I would never let her get into that condition again; I vowed to comb her every day.

If you use a brush on your dog, always, follow with a comb to make sure you have removed all the tangles. Many groomers say their clients make an effort to brush or comb their dogs, but don't know how. The results can do more harm than good: The dogs remain matted behind the ears, around the hindquarters and under the front legs.

Dog groomers are in complete sympathy with owners who cannot trim their dogs' toenails. A dog who will tolerate trimming without a fuss is either extremely mellow or very well trained.

If your dog needs bathing, groomers advise that you not bathe it until you remove all the mats and tangles from the coat. Mats tighten when they become wet and are much more difficult to remove. One groomer said it is not uncommon to have a clean but matted dog brought in for grooming.

Groomers find this to be a major problem when communicated with clients. A groomer does not want to torture your dog (after all, they do tend to be animal lovers). If you cannot get the mats out at home, a groomer's skills and equipment can only go so far to solve the problem.

Extensive dematting will irritate the dog's skin, and although a sedative can spare the dog pain during dematting, it will not prevent soreness later. No doubt your veterinarian will agree with your groomer that no dog should be expected to remain conscious during extensive dematting. This is painful, and more that an hour of it can be inhumane.

When they bring dogs in for a grooming, many owners want their dogs to look like show dogs, but do not realize the regular care such coats receive. If your groomer believes your matted dog should be clipped short, don't blame the groomer. Instead, be thankful he or she places your dog's welfare first.

Groomers try hard to make grooming pleasant for the animals. Most groomers talk to the dogs, pet them and praise them when they sit still.

### **Parasite Control**

To determine the status of fleas and ticks and mosquitoes in your area, ask your groomer. Because fleas spread so easily, groomers must practice strict flea-control techniques. If you don't think your dog has fleas, but the groomer says it does, treats the dog and charges you, don't be angry. This is not a money-making ploy. The dog must be treated to protect other dogs in the shop from flea infestation. It is rare that animals pick up fleas from grooming shops.

Make sure you tell your groomer about your dog's health problems, any medications it takes or any pesticides you may have used. The groomer has a variety of products to kill fleas and needs this information in order to choose one that is safe for your dog.

In some parts of the country, groomers see dogs so infested with ticks that the dogs require immediate veterinary attention. Ticks carry diseases that endanger dogs and people, so it is important to eradicate them. Many times owners are unaware of the parasite problems because the creatures are hidden in the dog's coat. Groomers see some shocking parasite problems, though, when they wet infested dogs for bathing.

The groomers said that some pet owners rely on them to detect and report parasites on their dogs; others are offended and don't believe it when they are told their dog has fleas and/or ticks. One groomer mentioned that some owners prefer to hear this news out of earshot of other clients. Groomers have difficulty convincing owners that a dog infested with fleas or ticks is a sign that the dog's home premises are also infested.

A disturbing reality is the actual number of dogs brought to the grooming shop when they should be taken to a veterinary hospital instead. The groomers I spoke to agreed that owners frequently bring sick dogs for grooming before taking them to their veterinarians. Apparently, the owners do not want the veterinarian to see the dog when it needs grooming.

### **Grooming Older Dogs**

Groomers can work with owners to provide the right care for elderly dogs that require clipping. As dogs age, their ability to stand for long periods on the grooming table decreases. They may develop sore mouths or become blind so that having their faces clipped is painful or frightening. Arthritis can make having their feet clipped an ordeal.

At the same time, an elderly dog's coat may be sparse and its skin spotty. Short trims are best, but owners may want the dog to look as it used to. If a groomer recommends a utility trim for your elderly pet, don't be offended. Let your groomer help you give your dog a pleasant retirement.

While groomers often work on a schedule of having dogs come in early and stay all day for grooming, all agreed that elderly dogs and puppies need shorter appointments. Make this appointment ahead of time so the groomer can accommodate your older dog.

### **Dogs that Bite**

Some dogs bite due to poor temperament, but there is usually much an owner can do to keep them from biting groomers. The groomers highly recommend puppy classes, and many take their own puppies to such classes. Regular trips to the grooming shop during puppyhood will help make it an experience the dog will not fear later. The first grooming visit should come soon after the puppy's first vaccinations.

Dogs that are not groomed very often are prime candidates to become biters. But as one groomer pointed out, "Dogs that bite still have to be groomed." Most groomers interviewed will accept dogs whose owners honestly tell them the dog bites. In fact, they say things generally go well when an honest owner tells this to a groomer in advance. If a dog is too aggressive for a groomer to handle safely, the dog must be referred to a veterinarian for sedation—none of the groomers I interviewed will administer a drug to sedate a dog. All said they will groom a dog sedated before being brought in, but most believe such cases belong in a veterinarian's clinic for a medically supervised grooming. One groomer said that a partially sedated biting dog is like a "mean drunk." All agreed that the dog will still try to bite, but its reflexes are slower.

Some biting dogs are muzzled for grooming, or another groomer restrains the dog. The groomers reported that some dogs relax when muzzled and some fight harder.

Dogs that groomers refuse to groom are those that bite when the groomer is not working on the dog. They believe that the owner of such a dog knows that it will bite and chooses not to tell the groomer. They said owners often reveal that they knew their dogs might be dangerous when they ask such questions as "Did he try to bite you?" If your dog bites, be sure to discuss this with the groomer. You will be amazed at what groomers can handle and to what lengths they will go for your dog.

### **Grooming Costs**

Even if your dog can go two months between grooming visits, the cost will add up, especially if you have more than one dog. I asked groomers what they think about owners who want to learn how to trim their own dogs. The answer was almost unanimous: they would love to help you.

Of course, it is unreasonable to expect a groomer to teach you how to clip your dog while he or she is working. Be considerate of the groomer's time and offer compensation for helping you. Many breeders groom their show dogs, so you might be able to learn from your dog's breeder. Another approach is to use books or videotapes.

One groomer told me she is always willing to help owners learn since it was not being able to afford to have her own dogs groomed professionally that inspired her to learn grooming. She said she considers it admirable when an owner wants to groom his or her own dog, and she doesn't worry about losing business.

This attitude could actually bring in business for this groomer. Owners often find clipping more difficult than they expected and come back to the groomer with a new appreciation. In other cases, owners do most of the work at home, but bring their dogs in a few times a year for the groomer to set a pattern. If you decide to try clipping your dog at home, consult several groomers about the equipment you should purchase. As one groomer said, "Cheap equipment will not work. Quality equipment is the most important thing in grooming properly."

Dogs that are groomed frequently—every one to two weeks—often run right to the cages they consider their own. The groomers say these regular customers are the easiest to groom, and since they require less of the groomer's time, each visit is less costly to their owners.

If a dog develops a problem after a trip to the groomer, all the groomers said they would want to be notified as soon as possible. It is often impossible to see clipper burn (a skin irritation resulting from being clipped) immediately after clipping. If notified, the groomer can note the problem on the dog's records and take precautions the next visit to prevent it. However, some dogs have sensitive skin. In such cases, avoiding clipper burn is next to impossible.

The groomers I interviewed are reputable, skilled professionals. They work hard and they really love dogs: a combination of talents that can make your dog's day at the grooming shop a day it enjoys.

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