

How to keep your pet's coat healthy

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Unless you own a Sphinx cat, you probably deal with your pet's coat daily. Every time you pet, groom, or even feed your pet, you're interacting with your pet's coat health.

One of the biggest factors in pet coat health is nutrition. Just like in

humans, omega-6 and omega-3 [fatty acids](#) contribute to skin and hair health, so pets with a very low-fat diet or who are malnourished may have dry, unhealthy coats. Luckily, most commercially available cat and dog foods contain enough nutrients to keep your pet's coat healthy.

Another big factor is grooming. Grooming your pet does more than just make them look nice—in addition to removing dirt, grooming gets rid of dead skin and hair, and it gives you an opportunity to examine your pet for any lesions, ticks, or other issues.

Regular grooming also prevents mats. Matting occurs when hair (including dead hair) tangles and knots together, creating an almost solid mass of hair. A mat starts small and continues to grow, getting closer and closer to the pet's skin, creating irritated or raw skin and interfering with temperature regulation.

Mats tend to occur in areas of friction, like around the collar or on the legs. Regular grooming means you can catch mats before they grow into a painful, out-of-control mess that's difficult to remove.

Cats are natural self-groomers, but it's still important to groom them. Arthritic or overweight cats may have difficulty reaching all parts of their body, and even good self-groomers can develop mats. Getting your cat accustomed to grooming at a young age can pay off when the cat is older and needs more help maintaining its coat.

Shedding 101

All pet owners deal with shedding to some degree, but different breeds shed different amounts.

Generally, dogs tend to grow heavy coats in the winter and shed them during the spring, though a moderate amount of shedding occurs year-

round.

Double-coated dogs also go through an additional shedding period in the fall. Double-coated dogs have two layers of fur: an undercoat that regulates temperature and a topcoat that protects the skin from dirt and the elements. When a double-coated dog "blows their coat," they shed their undercoat.

Cats also go through one or two cycles of hair loss and growth per year, but indoor cats tend to forgo those cycles due to the stable temperature of their environment.

In addition to the natural progression of the seasons, factors that influence shedding include:

- Age
- Stress
- Nutrition
- Pregnancy

Hair loss in pets

Shedding is a normal part of your pet's life, but a patchy or balding coat is sign of an underlying health problem.

There are several factors that can lead to hair loss (also known as alopecia), including:

- Allergies. Allergies can cause skin inflammation that can lead to hair loss, and they can also itchiness and secondary infections that cause a pet to rub their fur out.
- Behavioral problems. Cats experiencing stress groom to soothe themselves, but this can lead to over-grooming.

- Hormonal imbalances. Imbalances such as hypothyroidism can cause a patchy coat.
- Fleas and mites. These parasites can lead your pet to chew and scratch at their [skin](#).

"In addition, some pets are allergic to the saliva of a flea and even just one flea bite can cause a pet to be itchy all over for days to weeks and cause huge swaths of [hair loss](#)," said Mary Songster-Alpin, clinical assistant professor in the Veterinary Teaching Hospital small animal community practice.

"This is called 'flea allergy dermatitis' and the treatment involves using an effective flea and tick preventative on all pets in the home all year long to keep all of the pets 100% flea free."

If your pet has patches of missing fur, make an appointment with your veterinarian to get to the bottom of the problem.

Provided by Virginia Tech

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