

The Realities of Matted Coats

A Complete Informational Guide on Matting and How to Best Care for Your Pet Post Shave-Down

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“The last groomer Bella went to, shaved her. And she was traumatized. We can’t shave her again.”

I am sorry that the last groomer didn't educate you enough, understand that all the information in this guide is typed out for you because we don't have time in our busy schedules to sit and explain this all out so you can take it as seriously as it is. In order to keep grooming affordable and accessible to everyone, we need to be able to keep the day moving to fit in as many pets as possible. I can spend over an hour talking about matted coats to clients and getting them to understand the ins and outs of why it's necessary to shave and how to prevent it from happening again. I am the type of groomer who will sit there and hold my clients hand through any and all parts of the pets life. I truly wish you take the information from this guide and let it motivate you to let this time be the last time the groomer has to shave down your pet.

Matting is unfortunately a very common thing we see in the grooming industry. More often than not, when pets come in matted there is a lot of resistance from owners to allow us to shave down their pets. “Your job is to make them look the way we want, and we want them fluffy.”- “We would like to make an appointment with you, the last groomer wanted to shave them so I canceled my appointment for Bella with them.”

As pet professionals, we are advocates for the pets in our care. Clients expect Groomers to be able to give advice on behavioral training, advice on their pets’ diet, advice on when things are serious enough to go to the vet. And oftentimes your groomer is the first person to see abnormalities on your dogs skin, in their ears, in their mouth, things that we bring up to owners so that they can get the jump on treating these things with their vet. These are all the makings of a relationship and trust between owner/groomer/pet. So why do clients not believe us when we say that shaving down, starting fresh and more frequent care to prevent this from happening again isn't in the best interest of the pet? “That groomer was lazy and didn't want to take the time to brush my dog out.”

Matted hair is a sneaky thing. You can be brushing your dog every single day and as soon as your dog gets long enough, all it takes is a day of swimming, a moment of rough housing and being mouthed at by another dog, or even just everyday friction between their armpits, this is all it can take for matting to form. If you aren't using **proper brushing techniques** and using a comb to check and make sure every hair is separated down to the skin, even if the outside of the coat looks good, it's likely matted close to the skin.

Groomers hearts ache for the matted pet on their table. They have patience and kindness because they know they aren't biting because they're mean, they're biting because they aren't used to grooming and they are scared. Or the matting is actually really uncomfortable and the shaving process feels uncomfortable and they think or have some level of pain. I'll speak for myself when I say I form a connection with every matted dog I've ever groomed, because I can look in their eyes and feel their discomfort and confusion. But I can assure you that most groomers that care about pets feel the same way.

WHY We Had to Shave Your Pet and HOW Did it Happen and HOW to Prevent it from Happening Again?

Matting is a lot of hair knotted up, typically trapping dirt and oils from the dog's body throughout it. Groomers tools are meant to cut through a clean, brushed out coat. If a dog's coat is matted you can't see what is happening to the skin underneath those mats. You can't see any moles, or even sometimes where the skin actually is since the mats can create tension on the skin and make it stretch away from where the skin should naturally be.

Matting can also be painful and uncomfortable. When the mats are on the skin, it slows the circulation of the blood flow to the skin. Imagine your hair pulled in an unnatural spot way too tightly, like a super tight pony tail. Over time, they can restrict airflow, trap moisture, and create the perfect environment for infections, sores and parasites to thrive underneath all the matted coats.

Your dog's coat is their natural temperature regulation. Dogs' coats help them stay cool in the summer and warm in the winter. They can't sweat like we do to regulate our body temperatures. When matting occurs, it does not allow their coats to work the way they were meant to, which can cause overheating and discomfort.

Matting, if left, will continue to get worse and worse. In severe cases, matting can limit dogs mobility and cut off circulation to extremities altogether. In severe neglect cases, dogs are found with matting actually cutting into skin because it got so tight and limbs sometimes need to be amputated. Infections fester, bugs can get under the matting and use the wounds and moist area as a breeding ground and the pet as a food source. It sounds graphic because it is. And too often do owners unknowingly let it get close to this point.

This ignorance from owners is not all their fault. If this is you, please know if you're taking the time to read this and will take the tips seriously and do better in the future, you are a good pet owner who wasn't taught properly how to care for your pet. This lack of knowledge can be a result of there not being enough education out there for pet owners. Backyard breeders, or puppy mills that are in it for the money, do not properly explain the grooming needs of the breeds and pets people are purchasing. Yes, you should feel responsible for the life you have added to your family and it was your responsibility to educate yourself before taking this pet on. But at the same time, as a society we have normalized a lot of neglect because of the entitlement and convenience mentality. Yes, you should feel embarrassed or ashamed for

allowing your pet to get so matted, that means you have a sense of humanity. In the grooming industry, we call shaving down pets “humanity over vanity.”

The doodle craze, that pushes people to breed poodles to everything because the result is a cute shaggy teddy bear. This trend of doodles has attracted lots of irresponsible breeders who breed dogs to make a quick buck and lie to their new pet owners that the dog is hypoallergenic and should not be groomed until they are a year old. This is because they know the cost of grooming is high, and they are selling their puppies for thousands of dollars each and don't want people to know how much the upkeep on these dogs will be. If the pet owners listen to these breeders, their pet will have high anxiety for grooming because puppies should be desensitized to grooming.

Time and time again, we as groomers see people that come in with an 8 month old puppy and they tell the groomer that “the breeder said if they get a haircut before 8 months- a year that the coat will be ruined.” Lies. A puppy coat is different from an adult coat. If you cut the coat short you can rush the process of coat change, but the coat was going to change eventually anyways. All animal's coat types and coat textures change as they grow up, or chicks grow in feathers, or human babies' hair gets longer and thicker. You can get a dog groomed without cutting off a ton of length, to preserve the puppy coat if you want. You can let the dog's hair grow its whole life theoretically if you have proper maintenance and regular professional grooming appointments.

Brushing out matting would take a lot of patience from your pet, because it would be a very lengthy process. (This would also cost a lot more because your groomer's time is valuable, as this is how we make a living and pay our bills). Not only would it take a long time, which most dogs wouldn't tolerate being patient on the table, but it is also dangerous due to the fragile nature of their skin. The constant pulling in the attempt of detangling could cause abrasions, bruising, or even tearing in some areas. This is why groomers don't even entertain matting being brushed out in most cases. Shaving down to the skin is the safest and kindest option you can offer a dog that is matted. Even if the dog is calm and tolerates the brushing process to get rid of all the mats. Now we're left with damaged hair. You know your split ends on your human hair? It would be that times 100. This damaged coat not only won't look and lay the same way until all the damage grows out. But then guess what? The coat becomes matted more easily when it is damaged. All this to say, groomers are not lazy. It is simply not worth the stress of the dog, the money from the client's wallet, and the damaged results that would take even more attention to keep it from matting again.

When matting is against the skin, the only option is to shave underneath it with a #10 blade (which leaves the coat about 1.6mm long when used with the direction of coat growth). Any blade other than a #10 blade has wide teeth, and in order to safely shave a not matted dog with these longer blades, the groomer needs to be able to see the skin and pull it taut. Matting can pull the skin in random places and these blades can grab the skin in between the teeth and cut the dog. Even a #10 blade can catch skin with its tiny, close together teeth in severe cases or in “danger zones” on the dog where the skin is thinner and more flexible. In this case a surgical blade is necessary and a vet should be the only one using this length blade, as the liability of cutting a dog is even more serious, and they can send the dog home with antibiotics if necessary.

When matting is tight enough or in certain areas, even removing it slowly and with a #10 blade can cause bruising or hematomas in some cases. This is from the lack of circulation the whole time the matting existed. Once the matting comes off the blood rushes to the surface of the skin. In a lot of cases when there's matting all over, the matting also is on the tips of the ears. The rapid increase of blood flow likely causes a severe tingling sensation. If you've ever had your hair up in a tight ponytail for a long time and then taken it down, you can probably relate to some extent with the tingling sensation in your scalp that takes time to go away, or could even cause a headache. Animals don't truly understand pain, different levels of pain, or sometimes the difference between actual pain and discomfort. They can act out because they know something is wrong, to every pet this may look different. In the case of matting around the ears they typically shake their head. This forces the blood to seep out of the skin, its a circulatory response where there was no cut or tear in the skin. The force of shaking their ears and the ears hitting the neck and top of their head allows the blood that is rushing to the tips of the ears to burst out of the skin. This is an unpreventable thing that happens, the mats have to come off or it will continue to get worse. It is very important for the groomer and the owner to be supportive to the pet in these scary moments, but to not coddle and alarm the dog or confirm to the dog that anything is wrong.

If a pet is matted there is excess weight, as mentioned before, a lack of airflow and overall the pet is uncomfortable. Our pets are amazing at hiding discomfort, some better than others. If matting sits for long enough to the point it gets bad, the pets also get used to it. That doesn't take away all the negative things it is doing to your pets body and skin and wellbeing. They are just adaptable and resilient, and they love you no matter what. That's why we love them so much! When they get used to dealing with their new normal (excess weight, lack of airflow, discomfort etc) when you take away the matting and shave them down, it is a dramatic change to them. All of a sudden they can feel a subtle breeze. If their eyes were covered suddenly they can see again. If their paws were matted maybe they suddenly feel the texture of the floor they are standing on or they can take a step without the mats in their armpits pulling on their skin. I'm not a dog mind reader, but I do know from experience that sometimes dogs act up or act like a different dog altogether after they get shaved. If you pick your dog up from the groomers and are distraught that they had to be shaved, they sense the person they love is upset. They are already being flooded with likely fear because it's a new experience and so many new normals they have to get used to since they were used to the mats.

"My poor baby" "What did they do to you" "They butchered your beautiful hair" "You look so ugly" THIS AFFECTS THE DOG, of course they are going to be traumatized by the groomers now. Of course they are going to lose confidence and act shy and scared of the air as it's touching the skin that hasn't felt airflow in months. You need to build their confidence back up, you can't act like anything bad happened. You need to be excited to see them because they are the dog you love! Not, you dropped them off, you were anxious about them losing the beautiful hair and that they will be ugly. Then the next time they see you is at pickup from their appointment, you are disappointed. Maybe you yell at the groomer because how dare they take off so much hair. Maybe you cry, (yes, I have seen people cry over their dogs being shaved) there should not be an emotional attachment to your dog's coat, you are especially not entitled to this if you aren't even properly taking care of it at home. When you pick up a dog from being

shaved down you should not in any case show any other emotion other than love and excitement to see them.

When a pet that is freshly shaved comes home, you may experience different behaviors from them that worry you. It is your job for proper follow up care to keep the experience as a whole from becoming traumatic or becoming a further issue that will need veterinary care.

PET ITCHING/BITING AT THEMSELVES OR LICKING

If your pet is itchy, this can be due to the “new” feeling of air touching their skin. This could be from the increase in blood flow causing a tingling sensation. I imagine they feel like bugs are crawling all over them. If your pet is itchy, it is important to **not** allow them to itch. You are the human who is in charge of their well being. It is your job to manage their itching to prevent self-injury. You can understand when actions can lead to bad consequences. They can't. They don't understand that if they itch with their nails, teeth, or lick they can cause abrasions in their skin. They don't know when to stop. They can and will itch themselves raw. This is not the groomers fault. Though groomers take the blame for it often because the owner or groomer fails the client/groomer relationship by not going into detail about post groom care, or refusing to listen to the groomers advice. Sometimes groomers go as far as refunding the whole groom or paying for vet bills to preserve their reputation because in today's age, all it takes is a post on facebook to ruin a groomer's reputation to the public eye. All it takes is an hour alone when everyone goes to sleep in the house for the dog to dig at their skin, and the next morning they have raw spots. They just got groomed yesterday, it's the groomers fault, right? Wrong, please take precautions if your dog is showing signs of itching by putting a shirt on them to help keep the claws from scratching directly on their skin when you can't see it.

There are lots of options to try and help your pet. You could give them CBD or something to help calm them down and go to sleep. You can use an anti itch spray to help topically relieve the itching. You can try holistic topical solutions like aloe vera, or coconut oil. You can put a cone on them if they are licking. You can supervise them and tell them to stop. There are lots of ways to avoid a vet trip due to raw skin. If your groomer could, they would supervise your pet for you and make sure they don't itch. We care about the pets in our care, that is obviously unrealistic for us, so the responsibility is on you to keep your pet from itching. Consult with a veterinarian if you are having a hard time managing your dog's itching and they could provide a hydrocortisone cream or write a prescription for an anti-histamine.

INCREASED SENSITIVITY- PET ACTING SCARED OF EVERYTHING OR EMBARRASSED

If your pet is fearful or shy, it is important to show them unconditional love! If you don't like when your pet is shaved, and you stop petting them or paying attention to them every time they get shaved because you only like to pet them when they are fluffy, then guess what? Your pet is going to become fearful and shy and feel embarrassed every time they are shaved. The only thing that changed was their coat length. So to them, if you think they're ugly and don't treat them the same way then there is something to be embarrassed about, and it must be the shavedown. Not all pets are like this, some don't pick up on these human emotions, or are confident enough pre shave down that post shave down they are still very confident. But for a sensitive pet, this could be the case! Do not fuel shyness by using comforting tones and babying them. Either act as if nothing happened, and move on and put the shave down behind you or even better over compensate and act as if the haircut was the best thing on earth. If you over

compensate this may make the next trip to the groomers more exciting for them as they get so much extra love and excitement from their owners when they are done being groomed.

On top of emotional sensitivity, their actual nerve endings are being reintroduced to everything, this could be the sun, heat or coldness, or even the way textures of surfaces feel like on the skin like carpet or upholstery in your household. This could be a lot to take in and process. Be patient and encouraging to them. A surface that may have been favorable before may be too much for your pup's newly sensitive skin. Try giving them a soft blanket or cover them with a cotton shirt.

PET SHAKING HEAD/EARS SWELLING OR BLEEDING

If your pet is shaking their head/ears. Hematomas as stated before, are unpreventable if your pet was matted around the ears. It may not happen, or it may, there's no controlling it. A big factor I have personally noticed with hematomas is the color of the dog, it may sound weird but the lighter color the dog, typically the more sensitive/thin their skin may be. So a white dog is much more susceptible to getting hematomas when removing mats than a black dog would be. If you leave it "untreated" it may take a long time for the dog to stop constantly making it "reopen" and keep bleeding or to swell up at the tips of the ears.

A common treatment/ care tip when hematomas occur is to wrap the ears so they can't flap around. If the dog is small enough this may look like cutting a sock so there's a hole on each side and putting it around their whole head with the ears tucked under the sock. If the dog is larger you may need to get more creative and find something bigger you can secure around their head. I have had clients go to the vet before for hematomas, where the vet gave them a mild sedative to get them to calm down enough where they just sleep it off so the blood can clot, but this was in very severe cases, and the proper precautions were not taken as soon as they got home, so the next day they were still shaking their head and bleeding through the skin.

THE HAIR IS GROWING BACK, NOW WHAT?

It's almost unbelievable but guess what, it's going to grow back! It may take some time, but as soon as the hair is more than a finger nail width long you should start practicing proper maintenance on the coat. The shorter the coat is while you start brushing, the less time it will take per session to brush out the coat and then your dog can gradually get used to being brushed. The frequency of brushing is very dependent on your lifestyle, the dog's coat, the dog's lifestyle and how good your dog is at being brushed. As puppies before they even leave the breeders they should be getting desensitized to all grooming tools as they are friends not foes, for the rest of the dog's life. Then once the puppy is 8 weeks old and goes to their forever home, they should continue the daily training and process of learning that a brush isn't scary, and standing on a table is safe, the water spraying at you is not going to hurt you. These are all things that should be introduced and repeated often at a very young age to set them up for successful grooming for their life here on earth.

There is plenty (most) of pet owners that bring their dogs in every 6 weeks and get a "short but not shaved" haircut which would land between a #7 and a #4 blade (leaves the coat between 3.2mm and 9.5mm long) depending on your perspective of short. There isn't a huge visual difference between these lengths depending on the way the coat lays and how thick it is. These pet owners understand that they can't keep up with the brushing their dog takes and prefer a maintenance free haircut. This may be for you if you find yourself seeking the long hair but falling short on the maintenance required.

There are also pet owners that love the longer haired look but know they can't maintain it so they bring their dogs to the groomers very frequently. Depending on many factors these owners sometimes bring them in as frequently as every 2 weeks. If your dog is a poodle or poodle mix and is always in the pool swimming, you can't expect them to have 3" of hair without them also needing a full professional groom once a week or you blow drying them and thoroughly brushing them every single time they swim. You can have a shih tzu who only lays on the couch and barks at the mail man in full coat almost down to the floor, and it only takes a quick 5 minute brushing session twice a week. Set your expectations on yourself, and on your groomer realistically with the money you're willing to spend and your time you are willing to spend. Don't forget to factor in your dog's preferences as well. If you haven't desensitized them to brushing properly, and don't have the time and patience it would take to get them to be okay with coat maintenance, you shouldn't force them into brushing sessions and have to hold them down, this is never okay. Keep in mind that the grooming fees for a poodle or poodle mix that gets a #4 haircuts all over every 6 weeks is going to be considerably cheaper than a poodle that has over an inch of coat, which would take more than twice as long from start to finish per grooming session.

If you haven't set up your next appointment yet with your groomer before you left the shave down appointment. Now is the time to call and get in, and truly establish that relationship with your groomer. Your dog needs to be on a regular bathing schedule, even if you want the hair to grow out long again. Proper bathing with a thorough blow dry and brushing is important for overall wellbeing of your pet and their skin. Would you splash in dirty water and then wait months to take a shower? Would you go weeks without brushing your hair? You should not wait any longer than 6 weeks in between grooming sessions. Life gets busy so sometimes you may skip brushing days. If matting is caught at the early stages, and you have your dog used to the grooming process, your groomer can use a good conditioner, and blow the forming knots away from the skin and then brush the rest out once it's dry.

IN CONCLUSION

Though there are bad apples out there, 99% of groomers are in this industry because we love pets. We love the art behind grooming and making pet owners happy to see their freshly groomed pet. We don't want to upset you, and make you never come back. A lot of us groomers have spent a lot of our own money and travel to different places to continue our education and learn from people with experience and industry leaders and take certificate courses so that we can be the best groomer we can possibly be. There is NO license or schooling or certificates **required** to be a groomer. You, yes I'm talking about you the reader, can legally buy a pair of clippers and a table and all of the grooming tools and charge people to leave their pets with you and learn how to groom on youtube and trial and error. There are no laws requiring us to handle dogs with care, respect and kindness or we could lose our license if it's turned into the board of pet grooming. There is no board, there is no license. If owners are told all this and still choose to only bring their dogs in once a year, then that's their choice and there's nothing I can do about it. If a groomer calls and reports neglect, there are no consequences because the owners brought in the animal to be serviced. It takes 6 months of no grooming to get that bad again. If I write it down on my calendar to call and report this client 6 months from now, the officers will show up and the owner can take them to the grooming salon again and since they take action, there are no consequences.

Do you get what I'm saying? There's no need for me to take the time to write this, or for your groomer to try and educate you at check in or check out about your dog's basic care. There's no legal need for the puppy mill breeder to make sure you know about how much maintenance your pet will need for you to have the long teddy bear look you're paying \$5,000 for. There's no legal need for you to keep your pet groomed on a regular schedule, but owners do it because they care about the comfort and well-being of the pets. Just as I care about your pets and am passionate about calling out the *somehow* standardized neglect that everyone turns a blind eye to. I will never decline a client who has a matted pet for service. They can call to make an appointment once a year and I shave down their neglected dog. But I would rather quit my job and close my salon than silently observe my clients, stay uneducated and make the same mistakes over and over at the expense of living beings, our beloved pets. So I will not stay silent. The groomer hate on social media over matted shave downs is disgusting. The bashing groomers over improper post-grooming care is sad. You can not tell me that someone who reads this and loves their pet would ever again entertain those posts, help cancel a groomer and end their career because their reputation gets tarnished. You can't tell me that someone who brought in their pet who was matted and was upset about it getting shaved down could read this and then leave a nasty review on the groomers business page. If anything, they would stand up for the groomer, because they know that the person is either unknowingly neglecting their dog or their groomer tried talking to them and they weren't receptive to listening because they think "how would someone else know what is best for their pet?"

Now, if you've made it this far, you now know what is best for your pet and I hope that I gave you all the tips to help your pet recover from their shave down quickly, and that I lit a fire in your heart to keep your pet healthy and properly maintained. If you decide to allow your pet to get fully matted again, that is your God given right, but you know deep down you aren't giving your dog the life they deserve. Call me blunt, drag me on facebook for shaving your pet. But your dog deserves better! I am not perfect, my dogs have gotten matted, not nearly bad enough to the point I had to shave them to the skin. But the couple times it happened I shaved it all the way down anyway because I acknowledged that I was at a point in my life at those times where I didn't have the time or energy to brush them daily. Nobody is perfect, your dog will likely start to get matted again just like mine have, but as soon as you see the signs of matting make the right choices. Don't cry over spilt milk as the saying goes, shave down and start again. Or keep them short and get them fresh haircuts every 6 weeks like most of our regular clients.