

The Basics of Brushing a Dog's Coat

How often, for how long, and what tools you need to correctly brush a dog depend on the breed.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. How often do you have to brush a dog? How long should you do it for and where should you brush? What kind of brush should I use on a Golden Retriever?

A. The number of times you should brush a dog each week depends upon the dog's coat. Short-haired and smooth-coated dogs like the Bulldog, Beagle, smooth Dachshund, and Doberman Pinscher do just fine if you use a rubber curry on their coats weekly, brushing in the direction the hair grows. Long- and full-coated breeds like the Keeshond, Samoyed, American Eskimo, Lhasa Apso, Shih Tzu, and Afghan Hound need to be brushed and combed several times a week, if not daily, to keep their abundant coats from becoming matted or packed with undercoat.

I prefer a curved-bristle slicker brush for most coats but some breeders and fanciers like a pin brush on full-coated dogs like the Collie or Shetland Sheepdog. For long coats like those of the Old English Sheepdog, Bearded Collie, or Briard, a wide-toothed undercoat rake works wonders in penetrating those coats all the way to the skin. When it comes to brushing, the major mistake most dog owners make is to brush only the top layer of the coat, allowing mats to form close to the skin.

The more often you brush your dog, the less time you will have to spend on each grooming session because you will be catching mats, tangles, and undercoat buildup before they become tightly set into the coat. If you start brushing your dog on a regular basis from early puppyhood, it will become part of a routine you share. Brushing not only keeps the dog's coat beautiful but it is important for your pet's overall health as well. A matted coat can cause skin problems and, in severe cases, can even impede a dog's movement. It can hold parasites, burrs, dirt, and debris as well as a doggie odor. Nobody wants to nuzzle a dirty dog. When you groom your pet on a regular basis, you are also getting up close and personal, going over every part of your pet's anatomy and uncovering any health problems early enough to get timely veterinary treatment.

If you are regularly brushing a dog with substantial coat, it should take twenty to thirty minutes to give it a thorough going-over. Of course, if it's a pint-sized pet, you can cut that time accordingly.

Golden Retrievers do best if you use a slicker brush on their lustrous double coats. They should be brushed out thoroughly at least once a week. These beautiful dogs are double-coated so you should be concerned with removing the downy undercoat (the fleecy fluff that gets all over the floor, furniture, and your clothes). I often brushed my Golden Retrievers outside in good weather to let the wind whisk away their shed hair.

In the grooming salon, we do what is called "line brushing," systematically working our way around the dog section by section until the coat is tangle-free and little or no loose hair is coming out in the brush. Take care not to dig those wire bristles into the skin, creating abrasions that can lead to sores and hot spots. If you run into mats or tangles, never yank them from the coat, but use a dematting tool to gently split them before brushing them out. Once the dog is brushed, we check our work with a stainless steel comb to make sure the coat is mat-free. As you run your hands over the dog's body, look for areas that feel lumpy or thicker than they should. Golden Retrievers get lots of coat buildup on their chests, sides, underbellies, and rumps. They are also prone to matting behind the ears and in their gorgeous plume-like tails.

A dog needs to be brushed wherever it has enough coat to mat or tangle. The Golden Retriever's smooth muzzle, for example, can be nicely groomed with a damp towel or washcloth but dogs with whiskers like the Schnauzer need their facial hair brushed and combed. Always begin brushing at the same place and you will be sure not to miss any area.