

Grooming Sedated Dogs

The positives and negatives of using tranquilizers on dogs in salons.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

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Q. I am just venturing into the grooming profession, alongside studying to become a dog behavior counselor and trainer. I live in Cyprus where a frequent practice of vets is to sedate dogs for grooming sessions, thus reducing the time needed and making it easier on them.

In the parlor where I work we don't sedate dogs. Instead, the calm, assertive, loving approach works with most dogs. Occasionally we come across dogs that have been sedated as much as once per month for grooming, and when they come to us they are impossible to work with.

Someone told me that it is due to the medication used for the sedation, and that for most of these dogs there is no turning back — they can never be groomed without being sedated again.

This sound very harsh to me, and I really would like to find a way to turn around such dogs. My love and respect for animals is endless. Apart from making the dog accustomed to grooming one step at a time using patience and care, what would your advice be in such cases? Could some homeopathic remedies be of any help? Is it really true that the sedatives can cause such permanent damage?

A. Congratulations on finding your true vocation! With your dedication and compassion for animals, I'm sure you will succeed in both in dog grooming and training. I agree that getting dogs used to being handled for grooming through hands-on training and a calm, assertive approach is best. Unfortunately some dogs have so much anxiety and/or aggression, either because of genetics or past experiences, it is impossible to groom them without some form of sedation.

If such dogs were used to being handled and well-socialized, most likely they would accept being groomed as a normal part of life. If you feel so strongly about "turning them around," by all means give it a try, but you must exercise great caution. There are some who we refer to as "two-person dogs" when it comes to calming them down and controlling them on the grooming table in my salon. It is always OK to ask for help.

We do not sedate animals; if a dog needs to be medicated, it would either go to the vet prior to its grooming appointment or the owner would administer the pills at home. Our staff includes veteran groomers who have the experience, patience, and skill to work with problem dogs, in most instances making the grooming experience far less traumatic, but there are a few cases where sedation is necessary, for safety of both the groomer and the animal. This does not make the job easier.

Working on an animal that is basically asleep on your grooming table can be a challenge. The usual method is to have the dog stand on your table so you can brush and clipper your way around the body, observing pattern lines, blending areas as you work, and seeing how the coat hangs and shapes up as you clip and scissor.

With an unconscious animal, you must roll its body over to brush each area while any styling you do would probably involve clipping the coat down short. It's almost impossible to style and scissor a dog sprawled on the table rather than standing upright.

I never say never when it comes to teaching a dog to accept grooming, even one who has been routinely sedated, but it takes lots of time and patience. Your dual role as a dog trainer will be enormously helpful. Some dogs become aggressive out of fear, while others act like schoolyard bullies, but they usually drop the dramatics once they have learned to trust and respect you as their leader.

Honest communication with the owner is vital, too. Because your time and skill are valuable commodities, they must expect to pay more for your services than those fortunate folks whose dogs are a breeze to groom. We term this fee a "special-handling" charge.

Massachusetts veterinarian John S. Kelley, DVM, M.S., owner of several veterinary clinics on Cape Cod, says the practice of sedating dogs for grooming has no negative long-term effects. These days most vets use Acepromazine, a tranquilizer

that modifies the chemicals in the brain to change the animal's behavior by blocking the receptors of dopamine.

"We have dogs who come in to have their toenails clipped that need to be sedated," Kelley says. Like many vets, he prescribes medications like Prozac for pets that exhibit problem behaviors in other aspects of their lives, as well.

There are also homeopathic remedies used to calm the dog's nerves and relieve stress. One is Rescue Remedy, a botanical product made from Bach Flower Essences that includes cherry plum, clematis, impatiens, rock rose, and Star of Bethlehem. People relax with a similar concoction from the same company. Administered through drops on the tongue or added to drinking water, it should be given at home before the dog is brought to the salon.