

Home Grooming Tips for Shih Tzu Owners

Try these tips for grooming your Shih Tzu at home.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. Our three-year-old Shih Tzu is bundle of pure joy. We took her to the local groomer's for the first three or four times to get a "puppy cut". We were not interested in having that long, albeit beautiful, hair that Shih Tzu show dogs have. We were never happy with the job they did as her coat was always choppy-looking. My husband decided to try grooming her at home, but it's been a challenge with her partly curly hair. Sometimes she turns out okay, but often she still looks a bit choppy. Should we just stick with clippers, and what size blades should we be using? And what's the shortest length we should cut? We'd really like to learn to take care of her at home because we bathe and groom her once a week and it is so costly to have it done that often at the groomer's.

Also, we have noticed for the past two summers that she gets black splotches on her underbody but they clear up after a couple of cooler months. We try not to allow too much sun exposure and keep her under shelters at the park but the patches still appear. Should we be putting sunscreen on these areas? She licks a lot and I'm afraid of her ingesting the sunscreen.

A. I can tell that you two are crazy about your little Shih Tzu! With a fascinating history tracing back to its origins in Tibet and royal role as a favorite in China's Imperial Courts, this regal little dog is a love object that deserves to be worshipped. I agree on coat length; few pet owners have the time needed to keep their little beauties in a flowing "show trim." I am sorry that your experiences at the groomer's disappointed you. To give this dog a "puppy cut" or "teddy bear trim," a groomer needs expert scissoring skills to produce the velvety-smooth plush appearance you were seeking.

In our salon, we do what we call a "#4 and Post," using a #4 blade (or sometimes a #5) on the back, belly and chest, either scissoring the legs into short round columns or using a snap-on plastic comb attached to a #30 blade to trim them. After the bath, we blow dry the coat, brushing the legs out full, then evening up any choppy areas with our shears. Always scissor vertically with an even motion; jerky bouncing scissor strokes will cause the choppiness you want to avoid. I would not use a blade that cuts closer than a #7 on your dog's body but you may use a #10 carefully to scoop out her pads and tidy up her rear for sanitary reasons.

One recent improvement in the clipper blade arena is the addition of stainless steel blades that leave the coat longer, a big improvement because snap-on comb attachments sometimes pop off the blade in mid-trim, resulting in holes in the coat. Luckily, blades of all sizes are interchangeable between the major clipper brands. Bear in mind that both these new longer blades and snap-on attachments will jam up if your little darling's coat has mats or tangles.

You can straighten her curls if you blow dry the coat, stretching the hair as you direct the air flow where you are brushing. The Shih Tzu eye area requires daily cleaning with a washcloth or cotton ball moistened with warm water to keep it clean and fresh. I also recommend plucking out the hair in her ear canals, just a few hairs at a time, using a resin ear powder to help your fingers get a grip. Ear care is important because this breed's drop ears provide a warm moist environment where bacteria can flourish. Follow up by gently swabbing with ear wash, available where pet products are sold.

Although traditionally, the Shih Tzu sported a topknot, I think a softly rounded cap on top of the head better suits this shorter pet trim. I would not be alarmed about those dark spots on her belly. This pigmentation is quite common. If her hair and skin look and smell healthy, you need not worry about her "freckles." If you don't shave her naked and keep her mainly in the shade – or get a doggie stroller for her outings – she won't get sunburned so sunscreen won't be necessary. It will make her greasy and yes, she probably will lick it off.