

How to Groom a Cocker Spaniel

Tips to correctly groom a Cocker Spaniel at home.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I groom my Cocker Spaniel at home, but I just can't seem to get her coat as short as I want and as neat as can be. The reason I don't go to a groomer is because they are too expensive for me. Any tips?

A. I'm sorry you find professional dog grooming unaffordable. It often happens that when someone gets a dog, they are unaware of the cost of the pet's upkeep, and in my opinion the Cocker Spaniel is a high-maintenance breed in terms of its grooming needs. We see most of our Cocker clients on a four-to-six week basis so I know it can get expensive.

Available in a rainbow of colors, the Cocker Spaniel is one of the most popular of American purebred dogs. There is nothing more beautiful than a well-groomed Cocker Spaniel but it is one of the most difficult breeds to groom correctly, even for us professionals. To do the job right, you need to know what a well-groomed Cocker should look like. One place to start is the American Kennel Club site, www.akc.org

The Cocker's topline, running all the way along its back, should appear level or slightly sloped, the docked tail an extension of that line. The muzzle and throat are shaved with a #10 blade, as are the top third of the dog's long ears. The top of the head sports a crown, or topknot, while the skull is clipped close. We use thinning shears to blend this crown into the smooth skull at the top of the neck. To do the job at home, you will need a professional set of clippers and a grooming table as well as a curved-bristle slicker brush, nail clippers, and a good set of grooming shears. Cotton balls and an ear-cleaning solution are also needed to clean the ears on a regular basis. Because they are long and heavy-coated, the ear canals inside are the perfect breeding ground for bacteria, making this dog prone to ear infections.

In the grooming salon, we most often use clippers on the back but for the show ring, the Cocker is never shaved. Instead, the back is hand-stripped and carded to make it smooth as glass, removing undercoat fuzz and dead coat with a stripping knife and one of the newly popular carding tools. The vast majority of pet owners prefer a pet trim, the back usually clipped with either a #5F or #7F blade with the legs and feathering trimmed short for easy maintenance. We start blending the pattern lines at the shoulder and over the ribcage and thighs in the rear. If you get the chance to attend a dog show, you can see how the dog's look is balanced. There should never be a clear demarcation between the clipped portion and the feathering, that unfortunate look of a dog in a tutu!

We use snap-on combs attached to our clipper blades to trim the legs as long or short as the owner requests. After the bath, conditioning rinse, and blow-dry, we go over the entire pattern a second time, neatening up any choppy areas with our shears. The feet are rounded to match the width of the cylindrical legs. We clean out the pads with a #10 blade, also using it (very carefully) to clean the genital area and around the anus, what we call a "sanitary trim." You could also clip your dog very short all over, what we call a "strip," to make maintenance a snap. No matter how long or short the coat, this dog does require regular brushing between grooming sessions to keep mats from forming. Originally bred to be hunting dogs, Cocker Spaniels love to romp outdoors so they can come home with all kinds of twigs and debris in their coats.

There are videos available on how to groom your Cocker Spaniel. One of the best I have seen is called "Captivating Cocker Spaniels," made by champion groomer Jodi Murphy, who shares the techniques and secrets that have made her a star in the competition ring. The video will teach you all about the dog's basic profile, coat maintenance, and both show and pet trims. Who knows? You might get bitten by the grooming bug and want to become a professional pet groomer yourself!