

Problems Drying a Maltese

Introduce a quieter blow dryer in small steps to dry a spooked Maltese.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I have a Maltese puppy and I give him weekly baths at home. He takes a bath very well, but drying him off is another story. He hates the blow dryer and will whine and cry when it's on like it's going to kill him. Plus, if he gets away from me, he will run as fast and far as he can and starts digging at things. Usually, I wrap him up in a towel and hold him, but he sits and shivers for hours. Should I just continue using the towel, or is there anything else I can do?

A. Unfortunately, drying a Maltese with just a towel will never result in the coat looking the way it should, hanging straight and full, a beautiful mantle falling over body. This glamorous dog can be traced back to Phoenician sailors around 1000 B.C. and were later the lapdogs of European royalty. Traditionally, the coat is worn parted down the dog's back, his head styled with two topknots.

Whether your Maltese is kept long like a show dog or gets a fluffy "teddy bear" trim at the groomer's, the only way to get that coat to lie straight and look the way it's supposed to is by using a blow dryer. In the salon, we employ a method called "stretch drying," using a slicker brush on the portion of the coat where the warm air flow is directed and systematically working our way around the pet. In the process, we are both straightening the coat and adding volume. If the dog is getting a scissor trim, this drying technique is essential to get a nice smooth finish. Even if the hair is left long, the hallmark of the Maltese coat is that it lays flat and silky.

This single-coated breed has hair similar to ours; if not brushed and combed regularly, it will get knotted and tangled. According to the AKC standard, "any suggestion of kinkiness, curliness, or woolly texture is objectionable," so whether your dog is getting bathed at home or at the groomer's, he will need to learn to accept the blow dryer unless you don't mind him looking curly or choose keep him in a very short clip – but my guess is he won't like the electric clipper any more than he does the dryer.

Because the Maltese is a toy breed, usually weighing between four and six pounds, it's easy to understand why he thinks that loud machine will blow him off the table. In the salon, we usually don't use a heavy-duty dryer on such tiny pets because it can spook them. We use a floor-standing dryer for the final blow-drying step and it does take some getting used to before small dogs accept it as part of a familiar routine. At home, you may now be using the same hand-held dryer on him that you use on your own hair and its high-pitched whine puts him into a panic. Instead, opt for an adjustable table dryer that allows you to use both hands as you work. A grooming table with its post and harness and a non-skid surface will make your job much easier. Andis makes a table model using ionic and ceramic technology that is much quieter than traditional dryers and is particularly useful for dogs like yours.

Even with a quiet dryer, it will take time to desensitize him. Desensitization involves gradually exposing a pet to the situation in small doses to avoid provoking the unwanted reaction. Start by holding him in your arms while someone else turns the dryer on in the next room. Carry him around and talk to him reassuringly, rewarding him with a treat if he remains calm. Once you graduate to the next level and he has been toweled after his bath, have someone help you hold him in place while you aim the dryer flow – on its lowest setting – at his rear end. Always work from the bottom up, ending at the head and chest, and don't move to the next area until the portion you are brushing is completely dry and straight. When you reach his head, use one hand to cover his eyes to protect them from the brush and the airflow.

Always make sure he has been thoroughly brushed and combed before you bathe him and use a light stroke when brushing. This breed has sensitive skin that can easily become inflamed by too heavy a hand with the slicker brush. Brushing will be easier if you use a light conditioner in his final rinse and mist his coat lightly with a static control spray to keep flyaways at bay when blowing it dry.

Another suggestion may seem to have nothing to do with grooming but it does: get your pint-sized dynamo into a dog obedience class, possibly puppy kindergarten. He may never grow up to be a four-legged bulldozer who can knock people over like bowling pins but he will be much safer and more confident once he learns the basic commands. Training also helps him accept you as his leader. Just because he is tiny and adorable doesn't mean he gets to rule the house!