

Go for the Gleam

Omega fatty acids hold the key to glossy coats.

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The old Black Labrador Retriever's suffering was written on his coat. For months he had roamed the streets of Prince Frederick, Md., finally ending up confined to a cage in a busy animal shelter. Although his eyes shone with warmth and gentleness, his charcoal gray coat was thin, flaky and brittle. Nobody wanted to take him home. A few days before his euthanasia date, a shelter staffer phoned Lab Rescue, an organization sponsored by the Labrador Retriever Club of the Potomac Inc.

"He looked pretty awful," said Dorothea George, owner of Icknield Labradors in Prince Frederick. She named him Ben and headed straight to her veterinarian.

The eyes of a dog may be the window to its soul, but its coat reflects its health. "An unhealthy coat can be the first sign of almost any internal disease," said Lynn Schmeitzel, DVM, associate professor of dermatology at the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine in Knoxville. Coat-dulling health problems can be simple, such as roundworms or hookworms in a dog's intestinal tract or fleas feeding on its skin. But a poor coat can also warn of serious systemic problems, such as an underactive thyroid gland, diabetes, kidney disease or cancer. Ben's veterinarian discovered he was suffering from severe heartworm disease and malnutrition. If these conditions could be cured, Ben's coat would shine again.

Not all dogs with an unhealthy coat are as sick as Ben was, but many are malnourished in some way. Because a street-scrap diet doesn't come close to meeting daily nutritional needs, it's easy to improve the coat of a stray by feeding it almost any commercial diet. The average American dog, however, generally eats pretty well, so when its coat doesn't shine, the missing nutrient can be difficult to find.

To improve a dog's diet, veterinarians and nutritionists suggest starting with an examination of the dog food label. Owners should look for a statement saying the food has been tested by an American Association of Feed Company Officials feeding trial. AAFCO is a national association of state officials that establishes safe pet food regulations to provide guidance for consumers, the pet food industry and government officials. Feeding trials monitor the physiological effects of food products on the consuming animals and provide researchers with data on the effectiveness of pet food formulations.

"That [food label] statement, to me, is one of the most essential statements on the entire pet food label," said Mark Lutschaunig, DVM, manager of professional communications for Friskies Petcare in Allentown, Pa. "It's the best guarantee we have that the food is complete, balanced and actually is healthy for living animals."