

## Go for the Gleam in Your Dog's Coat

**Omega fatty acids hold the key to glossy dog coats.**

*Joanne Healey Howl, DVM*

The eyes of a dog may be the window to his soul, but his coat reflects his 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. Coat-dulling health problems can be simple, such as roundworms or hookworms in a dog's intestinal tract or fleas feeding on his skin. But a poor coat can also warn of serious systemic problems, such as an underactive thyroid gland, diabetes, kidney disease, or cancer.

Not all dogs with an unhealthy coat are that sick, 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 him almost any commercial diet. The average American dog, however, generally eats pretty well, so when his 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. "It's the best guarantee we have that the food is complete, balanced and actually is healthy for living animals."