



Why Bother Grooming a Dog With a “Self-Maintaining” Coat?

One of the most appealing aspects of a Tibetan Mastiff is its gorgeous, full, thick coat. They are one of the most beautifully coated breeds and will cause people to stop in their tracks and stare in awe. All of us who own TMs have experienced it: You go out for a walk with your dog, and it takes you three times as long to get where you're going because everyone you meet wants to stop and ask about your dog. Of course, I am talking about a well-groomed Tibetan Mastiff, and keeping a TM well groomed can be a lot of work. Unfortunately, too many people want the look but don't want the work. In addition, there are those breeders and “experts” on social media that are touting the idea that Tibetan Mastiffs, as well as many livestock guardian breeds, have a self-maintaining coat and never need grooming. This is a fallacy. While traditional and correct coats on TMs and other working dogs need little maintenance as compared to some of the pampered pooches that are common in urban and suburban America (think doodles!), regular basic grooming is important not only to keep their coats looking good, but to keep them functional and to protect the health of the dog. This article isn't about how to groom, but more about what happens if you don't.

A Tibetan Mastiff's coat should be weather resistant; the overcoat (guard hair) should be coarse and able to repel rain and snow, while the undercoat should be wooly and provide warmth. Unfortunately, we are seeing a lot of TMs, most likely with some type of mixed breeds in their background, with soft, wooly coats overall, making coat maintenance and grooming even more daunting. A normal, healthy coat will shed rain/snow and dirt, as well as remain free of mats with minimal brushing. Even when it rains and our dogs get muddy, once dry, the dirt pretty much falls off the coat, and with a quick brush, their coats look great again. We generally do a short brush-out weekly on our TMs, and a more thorough blow out with a high-powered dryer and brush every other week. Our dogs always look clean and almost never have mats in their fur, even those with longer coats. The only time we see mats are with puppy coats and coats on our spayed girls, and those are quickly dispensed with. The Chinese type dogs with the longer, softer coats, require more frequent brushing, daily or at least several times a week, to remove debris and prevent matting. Avoid brushing a dry coat; using a moisturizing or detangling spray will allow the brush or comb to glide more freely and break up mats and prevents discomfort and breaking of the coat.

Grooming removes dead skin cells, dirt, and loose hair, which are the stuff that mats are made of. Mats can lead to skin irritation, bacterial growth, fungal infections, and provide a hiding place for parasites. Grooming alone can't prevent fleas and ticks, but it will help to control them, and can help you to spot them and take appropriate action to eliminate the pests. Rat nests and feces were actually found in the matted coats of one of our rescue dogs!

Removing any fecal residue that may have been caught by the fur is also critical. Retained fecal matter can lead to a condition called Pseudocoprostasis. Matted fur and fecal matter can block the anus, making it impossible for the dog to defecate, creating a serious and life-threatening condition. In addition, feces against the skin keep it moist and irritated, and can attract flies, becoming a source of maggots! A maggot infestation can occur within 1-2 days, burrowing into the skin of the dog and even traveling up into the anus, leading to death. We have heard of a number of TM owners whose dogs were infected with maggots, but fortunately were caught quickly in each case. Even if you don't have time to brush every day, do a visual inspection, and address any feces adhering to the coat asap. A sanitary trim can help to prevent this issue when TMs are in their heavy winter coats. We had one group of rescue TMs that came from a breeder cruelty case that had fecal matter matted and imbedded in their coats. One of the girls that I helped to groom had so much hard, dried poop in her coat that it looked like she was wearing leather saddlebags. In addition, her tail was encased in a

solid brick of dried poop at least 4 inches across. It took me over 2 hours to free her tail using a box cutter. We had to make a slit in the poop, pull apart and separate by hand, and then repeat until we found the tail, several inches deep.

The smell lingered on my hands for days. One of the rescue dogs from this group had 35 pounds of matted fur and poop removed from her coat!

Not only does regular grooming prevent matting, but brushing stimulates the production of natural oils and distributes them through the coat, which keeps it shiny and flowing. Oils provide protection from water, rain, and snow. This “waterproofing” effect helps to keep your TM warm and the skin healthy. Water trapped in the coat leads to skin breakdown and hot spots. When bathing your TM or if he has been out in water or wet weather, always dry thoroughly, to the skin, not just the coat. Hot spots are very painful!

One often overlooked aspect of grooming is that it allows you the opportunity to visualize areas under the coat that may be hidden. This past summer, we found a very small malignant tumor on one of our dogs’ tails that was hidden under the fur. We were fortunate to catch it very early, and were able to have it removed before deeper layers of the skin or the lymph nodes became involved, which could have led to amputation of the tail. This incident reminded me of just how important regular grooming is to the overall health of our dogs. If we had neglected to groom on a regular basis, the tumor may not have been spotted until it had become large enough to show through the long fur, and by that time, it may have been too late to save the tail, or maybe even the dog.

Although not related to the coat per se, regular grooming also helps to prevent other health issues, such as gum disease, ear infections, and feet/gait issues related to elongated nails. I have seen TMs with severely affected gaits due to excessively long nails, walking back on their pasterns. Even if your TM wears down his nails by walking, dew claws are common in the breed, and can become so long that they curl around and cut into the skin if not trimmed, requiring surgery to correct.

The take away here should be that even though a Tibetan Mastiff’s coat does not need extensive grooming, regular grooming can maintain the coat in prime condition, identify problem areas, and prevent grooming related health issues from developing. It takes way more time, effort, and money to correct a problem than to prevent it. Grooming is the first step in health promotion and prevention.

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Noble Legacy Tibetan Mastiffs