

Shiny Happy Pooches

Tips on basic grooming for shelter dogs

BY CARRIE ALLAN



PHOTOS BY MICHELLE RILEY/THE HSJUS

Focus your attention on the area where the teeth go into the gums, and angle the brush upward so that it gets at the base of the teeth.

Dogs don't care much how they look or smell. When dogs leave the house, they don't put on makeup. When dogs encounter something stinky, they frequently want to play with it. And the less said about typical dog breath, the better.

But people do care, and for those dogs who are living in homes—or heading for new ones—a little spit and polish can go a long way to making them appeal to potential adopters. A well-groomed pooch grinning from an online adoption listing says, "Choose me; not only am I sweet, I'll look great on your couch!" A grungy, matted stinkball says, "Move along. Nothing to see here." What's more, providing your adoptable dogs with a little polishing helps them get used to that kind of handling—their new owners will likely want to brush them

now and then, and if they're comfortable with it, it'll make the process easier.

Whether you're cleaning up recently arrived strays, prepping potential adoptees for their close-ups, or organizing a grooming event as a shelter fundraiser, some basic dog-tidying skills are a must. A doggy cleanup doesn't have to be complicated, and requires only some basic tools, a good understanding of canine behavior, and common sense—the kind that would guide you to skip the tooth-brushing step on dogs who've been known to nip.

Below you'll find help with the most basic grooming steps, not including the process of bathing. Bathing a dog can be an epic adventure, and *Animal Sheltering* has covered it before. You can find our instructional piece on dog-washing in the How To/101 section of our website, animalsheltering.org.

Tooling Around

You'll need some basic equipment: a dog brush (there are multiple types, but a basic bristle brush works for most coats), cotton balls or cotton pads, a low-alcohol-content canine ear cleaner, a canine nail clipper and styptic powder, a canine toothbrush, and veterinary toothpaste.

Some of these things—like cotton balls—you can likely get at your local pharmacy, but most of them are dog-specific and will require a trip to the pet supply store. Dog toenails are not flat like human nails, and shouldn't be cut using a human nail clipper. Likewise, human toothpaste is not good for dogs (it's not good for people, either, but unlike us, dogs don't know they're supposed to spit out the goo after their teeth have been cleaned). Besides, there's no need to use human toothpaste; the veterinary versions come in dog-



If you can't clearly see the bright pink line of the "quick" in a dog's claw, it's best to just trim away bits of nail at a time.



It's easier to see the sensitive "quick"—the nerves and blood vessels within a dog's claws—in a pooch with lighter-colored fur.

friendly flavors like "Beef" and "Chicken." (No word yet on the future availability of flavors like "Underpants" or "Unidentified Stinky Thing Found in the Gutter.")

You may also want to have a muzzle handy, just in case. Some dogs aren't crazy about having their nails trimmed, and shelter pooches may already be a little nervous in their temporary surrounds. For that reason, it's also good to work with a buddy; if you get a particularly wiggly pooch, it'll help to have a colleague hold the groomee while you shine him up.

Brush Up

Many dogs enjoy being brushed, but you can relax your guest by starting out with pats and long strokes with your hand. Gradually introduce the brush into the process, and brush with the grain of the dog's fur in long, smooth strokes. Try



The key to cleaning the inner surface of a dog's ear flap is to gently rub the area, confining your strokes with the cotton pad to the areas you're able to see.

to get the brush into the fur, but don't press it against the dog's skin; it can create a rug burn effect if you brush too hard. Use a softer brush around the dog's ears.

A severely matted dog will need to be clipped or shaved by an experienced groomer, but if you encounter a few small mats in the fur of a new arrival, work on them gently, using your fingers to untangle them.

Mats that are particularly stubborn may need to be snipped out, but make sure to have help for this; your partner can hold the animal still while you gently clip out the tangles. To clip out a tangle, slide a scissors around the mat, close to the dog's skin. Don't pull the fur too tight, or you could pull some loose skin into the reach of the scissors (using thinning shears can help avoid this, too). Then,

using a chewing motion with the scissors, slide and cut in the direction of the hair growth, away from the dog's skin. Some mats get quite thick, but these can often be worked apart using fingers and small scissor cuts until they loosen and can be brushed out gently.

Ears to You

One of the first things you need to figure out: Should you clean this dog's ears? Paradoxically, the dirtier and nastier a shelter dog's ear looks, the less likely it is you should clean it out—unless you have veterinary training. If a dog's ears are producing an odor, look red or inflamed, have any gross stuff inside the canals, or if the dog's spending a lot of time scratching them ... cancel the ear-rigation! This guy needs to see a vet who can figure out what the problem is.



Dog-specific toothpaste comes in yummy flavors; let your shelter dog have a sniff of it, then rub a little on his gums to let him enjoy the taste.



Try to discourage your canine client from eating the toothbrush—that's not the way to remove plaque or freshen his doggy breath.



This beagle looks good after a "spa" day and a change into his favorite sweater. How could any potential adopter resist?

But if your guest's ears are just a little grubby, there's no reason you can't give them a decent cleaning. Wear gloves or wash your own hands first so you don't accidentally introduce new problems, then take a cotton ball or a cotton pad and wet it with the ear cleaner. (Unless you *really* know what you're doing, don't use Q-tips for this process—it's far too easy for a dog's startled head jerk to send one of those skinny bad boys deep into his ear. Ouch. Besides, can you imagine how long it would take to clean a basset hound's ears with a Q-tip? It would be like cleaning the Taj Mahal with a toothbrush.)

Using the cotton pad, gently wipe out the inner surface of the dog's ear-flap. Don't push too far into the ear canal; stop when you feel resistance. Use another pad if the ear has a lot of dirt on it. Repeat this process on the other ear, making sure to remove any random stuff you may find—whether it's dirt, grass, the occasional bug, or long-forgotten commands to "heel."

Nailing it

Many active dogs wear down their nails naturally while running, but some will need regular trims. There are several types of canine nail trimmers available; one kind looks a bit like a small wrench, and another has a sliding "guillotine" blade that snaps down to cut the nail.

Either variety is fine, but make sure the blade is sharp, or you can end up just splintering the nail rather than making a clean cut.

Some dogs don't like having their nails clipped, and your partner can help you keep these guys calm as you work. It may be best to get the dog to lie down or get into a sitting position, so that you can work one paw at a time without causing the animal to feel off-balance.

Here's the most important thing about trimming dog nails: Don't cut too much. Dog nails are structured differently from ours; the "quick"—those nerves and blood vessels under our nails—actually grows within the nail itself. If you cut into this area, it will hurt the dog and may cause bleeding. If that happens, dip the nail in a little bit of styptic powder and keep him still for a bit.

But it shouldn't happen if you're careful. Remember, measure twice, cut once. Look at the dog's nails: On light-colored animals, you can often see the quick of the nail from the side, a bright pink line within the claw itself. It's safe to cut the nail up to that line.

In darker breeds, it's best to trim tiny bits at a time. If you look at the claw from the front—just imagine the dog is pointing a finger at you!—you can keep trimming until you see a dark circle in the center of the lighter-colored nail.

Hand to Mouth

You probably won't get around to brushing the teeth of your temporary residents, but it's a nice touch if you're doing a grooming fundraiser. And with the tasty toothpastes available, most friendly pooches can be persuaded to open their mouths.

Put a glob of toothpaste on the brush, and let the dog smell it. Then rub a little on his gums and let him enjoy the taste.

Now it's time for the scrubbing: Use one hand to lift the dog's lips back from his teeth, then use the other to hold the toothbrush and start at the upper rear area of the dog's mouth, where plaque is most likely to build up. Focus your attention on the area where the teeth go into the gums, and angle the brush upward so that it gets at the base of the teeth. Brush forward along the row of teeth, then repeat the process for the bottom teeth and the other side of his mouth.

Discourage the dog from his attempts to eat the toothbrush.

Brushing dog teeth is one of those tasks neglected even by responsible owners, but it shouldn't be—plaque buildup can eventually have serious effects on a dog's kidneys and heart. Your canine dental client may never acquire the shining pearly whites of the models in toothpaste ads, but if you can demonstrate the process for his owner and encourage her to continue it regularly at home, his breath may become less of a WMD. AS