**Chapter 16: Grooming Your Dog**

Grooming your dog guide is a key component to keeping your dog healthy and in good physical appearance. Grooming is also important because it helps to maintain the rapport between the handler and dog and will help the handler recognize what their dog feels like in its entirety. Having regular physical contact with your dog will allow you to detect any changes, such as identifying a lump or scab. By including grooming in your daily routine, your dog will remain presentable to accompany the handler in any public situation without fear that the dog will be observed by the public as being dirty, smelly and unkempt.

Guiding Eyes works primarily with two breeds of dogs, the Labrador Retriever and the German Shepherd Dog. Both of these breeds are considered to have a] ;o double coat. This means that the coat is made up of two types of hair. The first layer is made of the guard hairs or outer protecting hairs. These hairs are generally longer and coarser and help to protect the dog against the elements. The layer of hair below the guard hairs is the soft undercoat. This insulates the dog and provides protection both from the cold and heat.

Double coated dogs generally shed their undercoats twice a year and the guard hairs once a year, though it often seems as though they are shedding all the time. Shedding is regulated by hormonal changes in the dog’s body that are linked to day length. Other factors can also contribute to increased shedding or cause the dog to shed at odd or different times than expected. When a dog sheds its undercoat, it generally starts at the haunches and works its way forward. You may notice thick tufts of hair protruding out. It can look and feel a bit like cotton that needs harvesting. By grooming daily, you can minimize this and keep your dog looking its best.

Most dogs will not require extensive grooming, however, spending just a few minutes each day is ideal. If the coat is groomed frequently, the likelihood of needing a bath will be less. Dogs have natural oils in their skin and coat which are dictated by the level of nutrition and grooming they receive. Frequent grooming will help distribute these oils and keep your dog’s coat soft, shiny, and odor free. Over bathing will interrupt these oils and can dry out the coat and skin. A bath given each season (4 times per year) should be sufficient for a working dog. However, if the dog has come into contact with something foul, the dog can be simply washed off in the tub with warm water. If you believe that your dog is losing more hair than it should, consult your Veterinarian for advice.

Students will be issued standard grooming equipment, a slicker brush and straight metal comb, for grooming their dogs. Instructors will observe your first grooming session to ensure the dog’s comfort and provide tips and advice for effective and enjoyable grooming. The slicker brush will be the primary grooming tool for most dogs. It is a rectangular paddle-shaped brush with short, angled, wire bristles. To use the slicker, brush in the direction of hair growth, generally from the head toward the tail. Use enough pressure to brush through the fur, but not so much as to make the dog uncomfortable. Brush your dog’s neck, chest, thighs, back, sides, and tail. Do not use the slicker brush on face, legs, or groin area. Check the brush periodically while grooming. If your dog is in a shedding cycle, the brush will fill with fur quickly and you will need to clean it before continuing your grooming session. The metal comb can be used to pull the hair out of the brush. Hold the brush upright and push the comb downward through the bristles to remove the shed fur. The comb can also be useful in removing debris from your dog’s coat or loosening the dense undercoat on thick coated dogs. However, the handler will have to be very gentle to avoid pulling or tearing when using the comb.

You must be aware of sensitive areas when grooming your dog. Each dog will have their own preferences when it comes to grooming, but typical sensitive areas are the face, eyes, ears, legs and feet, belly and groin area, and the tail. Most of these areas can be cleaned by simply wiping with a damp cloth or towel. The tail will likely need to be brushed eventually as it is fur covered, but you should approach the tail very gently and slowly, taking note of your dog’s reaction. Grooming should be a calm and relaxing activity for both dog and handler. If at any point you notice your dog getting uncomfortable or fidgety, vocalizing, or attempting to avoid being groomed, stop what you are doing and evaluate how you can make your dog more comfortable or help them settle down.

If your dog has a particularly thick or thin coat, or is particularly sensitive, alternative grooming tools may be suggested. Soft rubber brushes can be helpful for sensitive dogs, or a grooming rake may be suggested for thick or long coated dogs. Stripping tools such as the Furminator are generally not recommended as they can easily damage the coat if used improperly.

When you return home, you can choose to have your dog professionally groomed if you so desire. While this is not necessary, some graduates find it helpful to have their dog professionally groomed a couple of times a year. This includes a thorough bath, blow dry, and brush out, as well as a nail trim in many cases. This is NOT a replacement for regular daily grooming. It is also possible to bathe your dog at home using lukewarm water and a shampoo intended for dogs. As always, your instructors will be happy to discuss your dog's particular needs.

*Updated September 2020*