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Time for a summer trim? Not so fast.

You probably think your long-haired dog looks miserable in the summer heat and would welcome a good clipping. But you might be surprised to learn that a haircut can sometimes do more harm than good.

Dogs have coats for a multitude of reasons:

- A dog's coat actually protects him against sunburn (dogs don't tan, they burn).
- A well-groomed coat will actually help a dog stay cool by acting as insulation against the heat. This is true even in hot climates. Although a matted coat will trap heat and moisture, a well-groomed coat will "loft" as the dog moves to and fro.

Some breeds have a double coat—a fuzzy undercoat and a beautiful topcoat. When you shave these dogs down to the skin, there's no guarantee that the topcoat will grow back to its beautiful profile. Instead, sometimes only the undercoat grows back so your dog no longer looks quite like his old self. Results vary by breed, so it's a good idea to consult a professional groomer before plunging in with the clippers.

Sound Management

Even if you decide to clip, don't overdo it. Better yet, consider these alternatives to a summer clipping:

- Dogs don't sweat, so it's important to provide shade, access to a cool spot or air conditioning in hot weather.
- Always keep cool, clean drinking water in a clean bowl available at all times. For an outdoor dog, use weighted bowls and fill two with water in case one gets overturned.
- Try filling a small kiddie pool with two to three inches of water and letting your dog cool himself there. Change the water often to keep it cool and to prevent mosquitoes.
- Take advantage of products designed to keep your pet cool, such as automatic water dispensers that attach directly to faucets, misting fans and gel-filled bandanas that stay cool for hours. There are even booties to protect your dog's feet from hot pavement.
- If he's double-coated, use a brush to thin out your dog's undercoat. A packed undercoat really packs in the heat.

Unfortunately, if a dog's hair has become severely matted, you may have no choice but to do a drastic clipping to give the dog some relief.

Good Health

Summer is prime coat-tangling time, so whether you decide to clip or not, resolve to brush and comb your dog's hair from the skin out once a week. Brushing distributes oil throughout the dog's hair, making it healthy and glossy. Weekly grooming is also a good way to stay familiar with your dog's health. It allows you notice any lumps or parasites and intervene if necessary.

Good Nutrition

Remember, heat stress is probably more often caused by obesity than by long hair. If your dog is overweight, consider transitioning to highly digestible Exclusive Reduced fat Chicken & Rice formula. Both are made with chicken or rice as the #1 ingredient, plus whole grain brown rice, oatmeal and egg protein. Follow feeding instructions on the bag to help your dog return to a healthy weight.

Meanwhile, don't assume that a short haircut is the best way to protect your dog in the summer. Follow these other hot-weather tips to help keep your furry friend happy, healthy and as comfortable as possible:

- Ask your veterinarian to recommend a flea and tick repellent.
- Heartworm disease is transmitted by mosquitoes. It can be fatal to dogs, so ask your veterinarian about preventive medicines.
- Never, ever leave a dog alone in a vehicle in hot weather, even with the windows cracked.
- Exercise your dog in early morning or late evening when the temperatures are coolest.

Have a great summer!