CARE FOR YOUR PETS:

Shedding Dogs Are Healthy

Some dogs shed hair only twice a year, but then others are fooled by being confined indoors a lot, and follow a different schedule. Here's what it's all about.

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. — If your dog seems to be shedding hair constantly, it's probably a healthy animal.

That's the word of a veterinary dermatologist, who adds that while several breeds have the potential to be cyclical in their shedding, they, too, lose this capacity if they spend most of their time indoors.

At the root of this virtually continuous hair disposal, explains Dr. James Blakemore, are the hair follicles, the hair factories for both humans and animals.

Blakemore, a professor in the Small Animal Clinic of Purdue's School of Veterinary Medicine, notes that breeds such as beagles, dachshunds, Boston terriers, collies and German shepherds all have the potential to shed only twice a year but that their hair follicles get fooled by conditions indoors.

"If these breeds lived outdoors, where they were subject to changes in temperatures and light periods during the year, they would shed only in spring and fall," says Blakemore. "But indoors, with moderate temperatures and daylight year around because of electric lights, there are no distinctive cycles to their shedding."

Each of the hair follicles, he observes, adopts a cycle of its own and changes are intermittent so that while some hair is being shed, some is being produced and some remains in place so that hair shedding is virtually constant.

The dogs that shed the most, he points out, are the healthy ones.

The reason for this, he says, is that a healthy dog is capable of producing a hair every six months in a follicle, while an unhealthy dog is not.

"A dog that doesn't get adequate protein in its diet . . . or caloric intake . . . or has a thyroid deficiency or other hormonal disorder . . . has to divert what might have been hair-producing material and energies to whatever its problem might be. The protein is diverted to a more life-necessary function."

What happens in this case, he says, is that the follicles adjust to the dog's needs, so that they produce the hair more slowly or the hair stays in the follicle longer before it's replaced or it is grown out finer, using less materials.

The veterinary professor says that he would be more concerned about a dog's health if there were not a great deal of hair loss and replacement. "What I'd judge a dog's health by," he remarks, "is how much hair is retained in place rather than how much is coming off."

But there are some less-than-healthy or diseased conditions that are signaled by hair loss, Blakemore points out.

If a dog is losing its hair-coat to less than normal density, he advises giving attention to "some very mundane possibilities . . . fleas or inadequate nourishment."

Regarding the latter, he says that if dogs are not properly nourished with both proteins and calories, hair loss above and beyond normal shedding will result.

Diseases that are indicated by abnormal hair loss, but with no apparent irritation or itching, he says, include certain hormonal disorders, especially hypothyroidism — a lack of thyroid hormones.

If, on the other hand, the dog's hair is thinning only in spots, like over its hindquarters and back, and the animal is scratching, rubbing or pulling its hair, the veterinarian would suspect flea allergy.

In this case, he says, fleas don't even have to be on the dog for it to be miserable since the allergy results from saliva injected by a flea and circulated through the bloodstream of the victim.

The animal, he explains, itches all over — not just where the flea bites — and the occasion of a flea merely "landing" will set the allergy victim off in a frenzy of scratching and snapping.

More about the flea problem from Blakemore:

He warns that fleas don't care whether they're on a dog, squirrel, raccoon or human and that when the temperature drops below 60 degrees, all of those fleas in the grass start looking for a home for the winter.

The worst time of the year for flea infestation, he adds, is October, November and December but that veterinarians see a lot of patients with flea allergy in January "because the fleas have all moved indoors and the people haven't yet appreciated that the itching could be from fleas."

The veterinary dermatologist remarks that dogs' tendency to shed only seems more pronounced in colder weather because lower humidity indoors creates more static electricity.

"Hair you wouldn't notice in the summer you're really going to notice in colder weather because now it's floating in the air, sticking to clothes and becoming a real nuisance," he observes. "It even hangs up in the dog's coat and makes it look worse."

The solution to this problem, says Blakemore, is very inexpensive: water.

Actually, it's a lot of water and a drop or two of a good bath oil. He advises using a "pistol bottle" such as a plant mister, with

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The dog's name is Needles, and the striking pose was caught by Baltimore photographer Peggy McCoy.

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