

Stripping your Irish Wolfhound's Coat

Stripping or hand-stripping is the process of pulling the dead hair out of the coat of a dog, either by using a stripping knife or the fingers. A hard, wiry coat has a cycle where it starts growing and then sheds as it reaches maximum length. Hand-stripping coordinates the shedding and makes room for a new coat to grow. Stripping is the proper method grooming for many hard-coated breeds. The hair is removed by fingers or with a stripping knife, the top coat removed to reveal the dense, soft undercoat. If done correctly, the procedure is painless. Many hounds enjoy having their hair stripped, especially when they are introduced to it as puppies. As you can imagine with an Irish Wolfhound, it is a process best achieved over several days and in a place where both of you will be comfortable for an extended period of time. I tend to use a sunny patch of grass whenever possible it is easier to clean up and the birds love fur lined nests.

In order to understand how *grooming promotes healthy skin* it is necessary first to understand the growth progression of the coat. Hair growth goes through a progression of healthy new coat, "dying" coat, and onto "dead" or "blown" coat. Hair growth stops when the underlying hair follicle becomes "exhausted". The dead hair remains loosely rooted in the follicle until it is mechanically removed. At this point the follicle goes into a "resting" stage for a period of time before producing a new, healthy hair.

Stage 1 is the resting hair follicle. The skin over it is unbroken.

Stage 2 is the growth of a new, healthy hair. This hair is thick, hard, shiny, well pigmented, and solidly rooted. *This coat readily sheds dirt and water.* As the hair continues to grow the follicle becomes less vigorous leading to stage 3.

Stage 3 the base of the hair is thinner, softer, drier, less well pigmented, and is now weakly rooted. The tip of the hair though retains its thickness which can fool you. On the outside the dog's coat appears to be in good condition even though in reality it is half dead. We call this stage a "dying coat" The *weak rooting provides a channel for bacteria to enter the skin* and cause skin disease. This is the stage when you see your hound's coat "parting" along his spine.

Stage 4 the hair is eroded to the point that its entire length is crinkled and has lost pigment. We describe a coat like this as "completely dead" or "completely blown". I have even heard some call this "sun burned" coat because of the dull color change. *This coat becomes matted and tangled and holds onto dirt, water, dead skin flakes, water, twigs, and practically everything else.*

Stage 5 the hair has been mechanically removed but still remains tangled in the coat. The follicle, now though, is able to close up and return to the resting stage.

So what does this mean? First, the dog with a healthy Stage 2 coat is going to remain cleaner and better smelling than one with a dead coat. It is also resistant to bacterial infection and so less likely to suffer from skin disease. It's shiny, well pigmented coat is a beautiful reflection of the well cared for, healthy hound that wears it. The opposite is true of the blown Stage 4 coat. Note that simply clipping the Stage 3 and 4 coat doesn't buy you much. You still have a dull, fluffy, dead coat.

We speak of Irish Wolfhounds as being a "double coated" breed. In addition to the outer, or guard, hairs shown above, Irish Wolfhounds have a soft, downy "undercoat" consisting of fine, soft, dull hairs that are much shorter than the guard hairs. There are approximately 3-5 undercoat hairs clustered around each guard hair. Nature designed the Irish Wolfhound to have its hard outer coat for protection from weather, the terrain, and its prey and to have its downy undercoat for warmth. The undercoat doesn't cause the same types of problems that a dying outer coat does. Over time the undercoat just becomes thicker and looser and adds to the hygiene problem.

What should you do to maintain your Irish Wolfhound's healthy coat? For show dogs whose coat is to be maintained in the very best condition we perform a process called "Rolling the Coat". What we do here is go over the entire dog and actually pull out the dead and dying hair. This can be done using either the fingers or a tool called a "stripping knife". These come in left and right-handed models and look like little saws with straight handles. The technique is similar using either method. First put a leash on your hound if he will wander away. Next, thoroughly brush the coat from tip of nose to tip of tail to get rid of all the knots and tangles. I then use my fingers to brush the coat in the opposite direction to lift the long hair and make it easier to grip. Then, grip a group of hairs either between the fingers or between a thumb and the teeth of the stripping knife. Pull the hair in the direction in which it naturally lies using enough tension so that the weakly rooted dead hair comes out and the strongly rooted healthy hair stays behind. Be careful to always pull in the direction of the lie of the hair, not against it. Work on a patch for a while then brush it down and use your hands to lift the next section to work on. If you find your fingers or your knife slipping, use bookkeeper's rubber fingers or chalk to improve your grip. I keep a damp sponge nearby to keep my fingertips moist.

By the way, does this hurt the dog? The answer to this is "it depends". Pulling the dead hair off the back and neck and sides of Irish Wolfhounds doesn't hurt them. Even stripping the long dead hair off of their ear leathers does not really hurt. Your hounds on the other hand, may try to convince you that you are torturing them, but this is just acting. Most young dogs just have an issue with having to stay in the same spot for any great length of time. You handle this by adopting an attitude that says "This is what is best for your skin. We ARE going to do this, so get used to it." After a while, it doesn't bother them much. Be aware that some parts of the body are more sensitive than others. Ears are more sensitive and some IWs are very sensitive on the belly. Many Groomers clip the belly hairs with thinning shears rather than pulling them. Just go more slowly and carefully on the sides than you do on the top. This also applies to the head and legs. Also pulling live, healthy hair is much harder to do than dead hair and greatly increases the dog's discomfort.

If the coat is completely blown, you can take it all off. This is called "stripping the coat". Here, all the dead outer coat is removed at once so only the undercoat is left. This approach done twice a year will go a long way to keep your hounds coat healthy and manageable. This is a frequently used technique on puppies to get rid of the old puppy coat or a coat that is so far gone that it is easier just to start from scratch.

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