



The Soggy Dog Blog: Your Lab's Dry Coat

We've spent a lot of time on this blog in the past talking about coat color. Now let's spend some time addressing care for that coat, specifically a condition that affects a lot of Labs: dryness. It's not uncommon to see a Lab scratching at himself, or to see those infamous little white flakes speckling his otherwise shiny back and chest. What causes a Lab's coat to become dry and what can be done about it?

I hear quite often from prospective clients that they have had or know someone that's had a Lab with allergies. Don't get me wrong, dogs can certainly develop allergies just like people do, whether it's the solution used to clean the floors or the spray used to deodorize their pet bed. Allergies definitely do happen. But before you stop washing Duke's pet bed and change him over to a grain-free diet, let's consider some of the other factors that could be giving him a dry coat – because a simply dry coat is *not* the same as allergies.

At Soggy Acres, we can't stress enough the importance of a good diet for your Lab. We've talked at length about the importance of keeping your Lab a good weight, but proper diet isn't just about weight. A healthy diet will also show in your Lab's coat. Fed the right blend of ingredients, your Lab will have a shiny, supple coat. Your Lab's food should have enough fats in it to nourish his coat. If your Lab is on a dog food for less active dogs or on a weight management blend, these foods have less fatty content and can contribute to a dry coat. Consider giving your dog a fish oil supplement with his meals. Given on a consistent basis, you'll really notice an improvement. Don't forget the importance of hydration. If you were constantly dehydrated, how do you think your skin and hair would look? Make sure your Lab is getting plenty of fresh water. If you work long hours away from home, live in an especially hot climate, or have multiple pets, consider having at least two water bowls available. The last element related to your dog's diet that impacts coat health is the presence or lack of "people food" in his diet. If you're feeding your dog things he shouldn't be eating, like potato chips and French fries, expect the results to show in his coat. Your dog's body isn't equipped to process a lot of human foods (some of which are even toxic) and foods like pretzels can be severely dehydrating. Even "cheating" occasionally can add up much quicker in his smaller body. Garbage in yields garbage out, and his coat will show the signs.

Climate is on par with diet for impacting your Lab's coat. There's only so much we can do about where we live, and a Lab's coat can get brutalized no matter which extreme he lives in. In the north, we have brutal winters which require running the furnace as much as 8 months a year. All that hot, dry air can really wreak havoc on your Lab's coat. Unfortunately, the natural long summers of the south aren't much better, because then he's exposed to the cold, dry air of air conditioning! A Lab will chose air conditioning over heat stroke any day, don't get me wrong, but again, you may want to consider supplementing his diet with fish oil in the months that you're running a lot of A/C or heat. There are companies that even specialize in liquid oil blends for dogs that can be added right on top of his kibble. If you notice his coat looking particularly natty, grab a rat tail comb and gently work it through small areas to loosen up and remove the dead fur and skin. Labs tend to go through two major sheds a year, usually concurrent with

the changing seasons. So if you're reaching to adjust the thermostat, now would be a good time to reach for the comb. Not only does combing or brushing your dog remove the dead bits, but it also helps redistribute the natural oils he has throughout his coat.

The last issue possibly causing your Lab to have a dry coat is over-bathing. Unlike many other breeds, Labs do *not* need to be on a regular bath schedule. (Even my pro groomer doesn't get this, and religiously phones to schedule an appointment if she hasn't seen one of my dogs within 8 weeks.) Labs are like a fine garment: spot clean as necessary. Avoid the full-dip bath if at all possible. Labs are water dogs and have a natural oil coating their fur, rather like a duck's feathers. When you bathe them, a lot of this natural oil is stripped off, leaving him dry and itchy. The more often you bathe your Lab, the more likely you are to see itching and scratching and flakes. Just use a wash cloth and a bit of soap to spot clean what's dirty (i.e. paws, ears) and leave the rest alone! If you must full-dip bath, use a sulfate-free shampoo. Did you know that most pet shampoos, including the so-called gentle oatmeal ones, are *not* sulfate free? Most people and pet shampoos are filled with harsh detergents such as Sodium Laureth Sulfate, Sodium Lauryl Sulfate, or Ammonium Laureth Sulfate, or "sulfates," which are what causes the dryness in a Lab's coat (and in your hair). I use a human sulfate-free shampoo on my Labs when they absolutely must be bathed. It gives their coats the gentlest cleaning and doesn't strip the oils as much as the alternatives.

Take these tips into consideration when considering the health of your Lab's coat. A Lab's shorter coat and natural oils can easily fall prey to bad diet and incorrect grooming habits. Like all other aspects of his care, a Lab can't care for his own coat. He's dependent on you to feed him properly and groom him when appropriate. Luckily, the fixes for a dry coat are easy enough and should have your Lab shining in no time!