

# FLUFF DRYING FAQ'S

By BBird

*What is it? Does it matter? How hard can it be? How is it done? Can I do it at home?* All of these questions run through the mind when we run into grooming instructions that call for "fluff drying". Also there's our little cynical voice that says "Hey, I have a fluff dog, I bathe it, I dry it, is that not *fluff drying?*"

**WHAT IS FLUFF DRYING?** All jokes aside, fluff drying is a grooming technique whereby the hair is thoroughly brushed while drying so that it is stretched, straightened, and separated. All curliness is removed, and full volume, lift and length are achieved. Long, flowing, coats have maximum flow, and fluffy, spongy coats have maximum fluff preparing them for scissoring and sculpting. In professional grooming salons and dog show preparation, this technique is used on most curly-coated breeds, such as Bichon Frise, and the Poodles. It is also used on most terriers, and all drop-coated breeds, such as Lhasa Apso, and sporting dogs such as Cocker Spaniel.

With the development of forced air, high velocity dryers (aka HV dryers), most groomers have replaced the Old School method of brush drying under an arm dryer for the whole process, to using the HV for part or all of the fluff dry. There is an ongoing debate amongst professionals as to whether HV drying can totally replace the old method. Either way, some brushing and stretching of the hair is necessary to get the desired result of perfectly straightened and separated hair.

The science of fluff drying for grooming is the same as setting or blow drying your own hair. Water breaks the hydrogen bonds of the hair which are what determine its shape. As it dries the hydrogen bonds are reformed. By brushing or stretching the hair with forced air, you can reshape it into a different, more straight, shape. The last few minutes of the drying time are critical. If hair is left damp, it will recurl immediately. On the other hand, some coats can air dry to damp and then be fluff finished with good results. How long a given coat can air

dry and still be straightened depends on the tightness of curl in the coat. The curlier the coat, the more wet it needs to be while being stretched and reshaped.

**DOES IT MATTER?** If you aspire to maximum professional results and excellence, fluff drying is a must. On a scissored breed, the preparation of the coat for scissoring dictates the result as much as the scissoring itself. When curl is left in the coat, hairs are bent inward and clumped together and the groomer cannot get a smooth scissored finish. The coat can be scissored, but it will look rough and ruffled. It's not unlike sewing with wrinkled fabric. The result is compromised if the *fabric* is not ironed. Another factoid: hair that is scissored while curly can be uneven, developing "stickie outies" (a professional groomers' term) between grooms, especially if brushed.

What if the desired result is curly? O.K.! Let's say it is a Kerry Blue Terrier that is supposed to have a curly coat, or a Bichon Frise where the owner is attached to a curly look. In these instances, you would fluff dry, scissor the straight coat, and then mist or dampen the coat to encourage it to return to its natural state.

**HOW HARD CAN IT BE TO FLUFF DRY?** Hard! How hard depends on dog's coat, the behavior, your equipment, your technique, and the weather. Expert fluff drying takes time. And patience - patience with the animal and patience with the amount of time it takes to do a good job. If you are drying in high humidity it will take more time. And did I mention patience? Fluff drying has great meditational value.

**HOW IS IT DONE?** The result is achieved by systematically brushing each section of coat under warm air until dry. The trick is to control the air from the dryer and the position of the dog so that **ONLY** the area that is being brushed is being dried. This is where the right equipment and the dog's behavior come into play. If an area of the coat dries without being brushed or if an area is not thoroughly dried while brushing, that area will be curly and ruffled and you won't get the result you want for your efforts. One must be systematic and control the direction of air flow, as well as the doggie behavior, all while brushing.

To achieve full lift of the coat, brush up and away from the skin. Work from the bottom up, so that you are not covering up any unbrushed/damp spots.

When I was first learning, the only way I could prevent the back of the dog from drying ahead of me was to cover with a towel and roll the towel back as I worked toward the rear of the dog. Covering the area on which you are not working will help prevent accidental drying and curling of other parts of the coat. Once you develop speed, I advise that you toss the towel and work from back to front. It does not matter if you do all one side and then the other, or move from side to side. Every spot counts: around the toes counts, under the tail counts, behind the ears counts, and the inside of the legs really counts.

Think of each leg as having four sides: back, front, inside and outside. Address each side of the leg separately, even though the sides overlap. As a beginner, you **NEED** to feel like you are overdoing it, until you develop the ability to see when hair is really thoroughly dry. Great grooming requires the development of an eye for detail, and this takes time.

**TIP #1:** While you are concentrating on one area and looking closely at your work, also cast a broad view to discover where else the dryer air may be moving the coat. Give **THAT** area some brush attention as well.

**TIP #2:** Keep the air source 3"-6" from the area you are drying. A smaller area, such as back of the hock, should be held close to the dryer, while a larger area, such as down the back, can be further away from the dryer. To maximize straightening with the HV dryer hose, however, it must be held right **AT** the skin.

**SHOULD THE DOG STAND OR LIE DOWN?** Breeders are often suggesting that dogs be brushed and dried while lying on their side. Good luck. Few of us have the wherewithal to teach a puppy to passively lie on its side for combing and fluff drying. If you can do it,

you will be way ahead, but I would not lay any blame if you can't accomplish this. Most professional groomers fluff dry with the dog standing on a grooming table, secured with a grooming loop at the neck or flank (or both). Please don't call it a "noose"; we are trying to get away from that image. Allowing the dog to sit is NOT a good idea, as this position covers up too much hair. Save the head for last, and let the dog lie down for this, the rest of the time it is best to work with the dog standing.

**TIP #3:** After completely drying the outside of a leg, lift that leg and aim your dryer on the inside of the opposite leg. While you have front leg raised, get the arm pit of the same and opposite leg. Armpits (legpits?) count, too. This is a frequently missed area.

**TIP #4:** Hold the dog up by his front legs, standing on the back feet. Get the front of the back legs, any inside back legs you've missed, and the underchest from this position. Likewise, the backs of the front legs can be addressed while holding the rear legs up. I call this the "Circus Dog" position for bad wiggler-squigglers.

By now you should be getting the picture that fluff drying requires maneuvering of the dog into the air flow. That's what you are doing with the other hand. You are brushing and moving the air flow with one hand and moving body parts and holding the dog with the other hand. When you are fluff drying the tail, you've got to hold the tail into the air flow. Otherwise you'll allow the whole backside to curl.

The only way to avoid curly spots is to develop speed and accuracy in your technique. If you allow the dog to determine which area you work on, you will invariably miss some spots. If you control the dog, and move systematically around the body with dryer and brush, you will become thorough. Only then should you work on cranking up the speed.

**TIP #5:** Have a spray bottle with water handy. If you accidentally allow an unfluffed area to dry, mist the area lightly with water and go back over it. A solution with one or two tablespoons conditioner to a pint of water, or a spray-in conditioner will also work.

**WAYS TO CHEAT:** OK this is the *secret* part. Ideally, fluff drying is done from the towel dried dog to the finished product. This can take up to an hour on a thick-coated Bichon. Few of us have lives that allow for this kind of time. So we cut corners. Remove as much water as possible by toweling and allowing the dog to shake. But do NOT rub. A small dog can be bundled in a fresh towel, burrito style for 15-20 minutes to absorb about 60% of the water.

A good way to cut down time is to blow out the coat with a High Velocity dryer before fluff drying. You can allow the coat to be 3/4 dry and then finish with fluff drying. In the salon, we call this "fluff finishing". Some dogs that do not have excessively curly coats can be allowed to drip dry part of the way, say 2/3 while you do something else. The reason you can let a coat get more dry with the HV than by drip drying is that the HV will stretch and separate the hair. Some groomers swear that they can achieve full fluff drying results with a HV dryer only. This requires a fairly powerful HV dryer.

Another way to cheat is to partly dry, then brush, then partly dry, then brush. You are drying and brushing, but not simultaneously. This will most likely give plenty of fluff, but not a perfect finish.

At home, should dogs be allowed to run around the house while drying? Although I would condone setting a dog down after the toweling to shake and maybe dance around some and get a treat, I do not advise allowing the dog to run around. Most dogs when left to their own drying devices will rub themselves on the floor, furniture, or wall. This can cause damage and matting to the coat. The dog can run around AFTER the drying is complete.

**CAN FLUFF DRYING BE ACHIEVED AT HOME?** Yes, but... Good fluff drying can be accomplished in your home as well as in the salon, as long as you invest in some equipment. At the very least you need a dryer that will stand by itself so that you can use both hands on the dog and the brush. Brushing may require only one hand, but you will need the other to control the dog, pick up feet, hold the tail, ears or face.

Serious fluff drying takes two hands. There is a dryer in many catalogues called the "Superduck" that sells for under \$50 and has some movable angles and temperature settings. It takes forever to fluff dry from scratch with a low velocity dryer like this, but it can fluff finish to a decent result. The combination of a small High Velocity dryer such as a Metro and the Superduck can equip you for some excellent fluff drying results for under \$200. The biggest disadvantage to these less expensive table top dryers is that you have to move the dog to the air rather than have the ability to move the air flow. With a professional type stand dryer, you have a much larger range of motion for directing the air flow, and there is a much higher volume of air for faster drying. These dryers generally run \$300 and up. There is a really nice HV dryer used by many show people called the Kool Dry, which is often used with a flexible "third arm" that clamps on the table, allowing fluff finishing. It is powerful enough to straighten most coats, weighs less than 10# and demands only 9 amps of electricity. The Kool Dry generally costs about \$350.

The grooming surface is another issue. Although much grooming can be done on any flat surface, such as the ironing board or the washing machine, a sturdy grooming table with a non-slip surface and an arm and grooming loop is worth the investment. I work with a support system called the LIPS (Linked Interval Positioning System). It's a tubular frame that goes over the table from center front to center rear and has eyelets for links and loops. My favorite piece to use with the LIPS is the rear T-strap which goes around the flank and between the rear legs to hook up to the back pole. This strap eliminates sitting down and restricts side to side movement. It reduces the struggle factor considerably.

### **TOOLS AND PRODUCTS:**

In my opinion, the best brush for fluff drying Bichons, Poodles, and terriers is the slicker. Let's dispel the myth that slicker brushes hurt dogs. Slickers don't hurt - too much pressure is what can hurt. Good brushing technique requires rapid wrist action and a light touch. You want to skim the skin, not scrape it. Slicker brushes allow for maximum separation and stretching of hairs.

There is another issue of whether slicker brushes damage coat. Everything we do to hair has the possibility of damaging the hair cuticle. The quality of our tools is most important, especially if pins or tines are rounded at the tips. For long-coated breeds, where the intent is to maintain a long, flowing coat, such as Afghan Hounds, Lhasa Apso, Shih Tzu, or Cockers in full coat, I recommend that the pin brush be used and the slicker be used only on feet.

For grooming Bichon Frise, and small scissored dogs, I prefer to use a small, light, soft slicker such as the one by Classic Products, or the #1 All Systems small slicker. Chris Christensen also makes an excellent line of high quality combs and brushes that can be trusted to be kind to hair.

The products we use also influence the results. I am a huge advocate of the use of products with silicone ingredients. Silicones, such as dimethicone copolyol protect the hair from the assault of our tools as well as improve combability and reduce tugging on the hair. A tiny bit will spread to cover every hair, and they do not over condition or weigh down fluffy coat. One of my favorite products for fluff dried dogs is Chris Christensen After Bath rinse, and I also love their Ice on Ice detangling spray. Best Shot Plenish conditioner is another excellent conditioner for fluffy coats. Fluff Out, by Davis, is a product that is sprayed on while fluff drying to enhance the results. Unfortunately the ingredients remain a trade secret, but the product works well. It will somewhat increase drying time, however.

**THE FINISH LINE:** There you have it! Successful fluff drying for ring ready results is a combination of proper equipment, brushing technique, control of the dog and of the air flow, being systematic, and developing speed and an eye for detail. With practice you will be able to see the difference between dry and damp hair under the dryer. You will see all the nooks and crannies. And most of all, have patience.... patience with yourself and your own learning curve, with your dog, and with the process itself. Happy grooming!

*Barbara Bird owns Transformation Pet Center in Tucson, Arizona and*

*has been grooming for over 30 years. She is certified in Non-Sporting Dogs by the NDGAA. She can fluff dry in her sleep.*

*Copyright 2005, Birdzeye Press, Tucson, AZ. All rights reserved. Use only with permission of the author, please. BBird@dakotacom.net.*