

What Your Cat's Coat Does

More than just upholstery, your cat's fur makes your pet unique.

Posted: Tue Jun 24 00:00:00 PDT 2003

No matter what the length of your cat's fur, its coat is much more than pretty upholstery. It protects the cat from the heat of the sun and the cold of winter, its thickness changing with the seasons. Shedding is most prevalent in the spring and fall, the seasons reflecting those times when the cat's coat required the most alteration in density when living in the wild. Our house cats are protected from major temperature changes, but their coats also get a signal to grow or shed from the length of daylight, which varies with the seasons. Living under the artificial lights of our homes, some cats shed moderately year-round.

The cat's coat comprises three hair types: guard hairs, awn hairs and down hairs. The long, stiff guard hairs form the coat's outermost layer, keeping the cat dry and warm. Awn and down hairs are far more numerous, forming the layers of secondary hairs in the cat's soft under fur, its protective thermal underwear. While awn hairs have stiff pointed tips, down hairs are shorter with a soft, wavy texture.

Shorthaired cats groom themselves more efficiently than their longhaired relatives. All coat types shed loose or dead hairs, but shorthaired cats swallow less hair in the grooming process and develop fewer problems with hairballs, those solid formations of hair and saliva that accumulate in the cat's stomach, causing it to vomit. Coming across such evidence of the cat's distress can be unpleasant but is preferable to having the substance remain in the cat's system, causing intestinal blockage, a potentially life-threatening situation.

Because of the coat's varying growth rate, shed hairs can become trapped in the coat, causing mats to form. Such mats are soft at first but left untreated can turn into a solid coat of armor, restricting the cat's movement and impeding bodily functions. Dirt, debris, food and bodily wastes can become ensnared in the mats, which also block the removal of millions of skin cells normally shed during grooming. The skin under the mats becomes irritated and inflamed.

When selecting a cat based on appearance alone, potential owners can run into problems if they are unable or unwilling to perform the needed grooming tasks to prevent such severe matting. Having a longhaired cat groomed professionally on a regular basis is another option to giving this type of pet the care it requires.