When we think of caring for our pets’ health, our thoughts might turn instinctively toward healthy foods, exercise, and vet visits, but grooming is just as important to your pets well-being. Although some pet owners prefer to groom their own pets, a skilled professional not only makes your dog or cat look great, they also offer services that contribute to your pet’s care, like nail trimming, ear cleaning, and teeth cleaning.

For some pets, going to the groomer can be a dreaded experience. The idea of a bath, blow dry, nail trimming, teeth brushing, or being touched with grooming tools like clippers or shears might make them anxious. Having a groomer who has built a relationship with your pet can make the experience easier and safer. The relationship between your pet and their groomer is based on trust. Both need to have confidence in each other, and neither the animal nor the groomer should be afraid of what the other one might do. After all, there is a lot of personal space being invaded while your pet is getting cleaned, cut, and coiffed! Finding a skilled and understanding groomer is crucial in helping your pet have a positive grooming experience. Introducing grooming exercises at home and low-stress grooming appointments can help prevent future issues with the groomer.

The first step in discovering your dream groomer is research: ask trusted friends and family for their recommendations and search online to find professional groomers in your area. Once you’ve narrowed your options, there’s no substitute for having an in-person conversation with your groomer-to-be. The answers they give and the way they discuss your concerns can tell you a lot about the people with whom you are entrusting your pet’s care. It's always a good idea to visit several grooming salons; any great grooming salon has an open-door policy and encourages potential clients to visit their shop. Ask for a tour and inquire about which groomer is best with certain ages, breeds, and any other specific needs you might have.

Here are some questions you could ask to learn more about the skills, training, and environment that a potential groomer provides:

* May I See Your Facility?
How does it look? How does it smell? You’ll want to see a well-ventilated salon, clean workstations, sturdy tables, and tubs, as well as pet-friendly products. Ask yourself, is this a place I’m comfortable leaving my pet?
* What Services Do You Provide?
You’ll want to understand what services a groomer or grooming salon offers. Groomers have the proper tools and knowledge for removing mats, trimming nails, and cleaning ears. Professional groomers can make you aware of ear infections, tooth decay, and skin infections.
* May I Stay and Watch While You Groom My Pet?
Your own nerves can make your pet more anxious. However, it’s not unreasonable to want to observe, at least the first time. It’s also a good opportunity to observe your pet’s behavior for future visits.
* Do You Have Experience With My Pet’s Breed?
Some breeds have particular grooming needs, so you may want to seek out a groomer who has experience with your specific breed. Ask whether they know what the breed standard is and whether they can perform the correct haircut for your breed.
* What Kind of Training Do You Have?
Training can vary. Some groomers learn on the job through apprenticeships or mentoring programs. Others attend classes at a pet grooming school. You’ll want to get a sense of the groomer’s experience, training, and knowledge. Don’t shy away from asking any questions you have about your pet's care. Many professional groomers are investing their own time and money to attend enrichment programs on a voluntary basis, this is typically the sign of a professional who is looking to improve their skills and their clients’ experience.
* How Will My Pet Be Housed?
Your pet’s safety when outside your care is an important concern. You’ll want to know how your pet will be housed when not on the grooming table. Your dog should have a crate to themselves, with clean padding, plenty of air, and in view of salon personnel.
* Do You Have a First Aid Kit?
Of course, you hope it won’t be needed, but just in case, a first aid kit should also be in plain view. You also want to know if a staff member familiar with first aid is always present.
* Do You Carry Liability Insurance?
While we don’t often think to ask this, knowing that your groomer has liability insurance can give you peace of mind. If for any reason your pet is injured while under the groomer’s care, any medical expenses you incur as a result should be covered.
* How Much Will My Pet’s Grooming Cost?
It shouldn’t be your first concern, but it’s a question you want to ask upfront to avoid any sticker shock. The cost of pet grooming can vary by pet size, species, and coat type, as well as what services are included in standard bath or groom. Some pets also take longer to groom than others. A professional groomer will be able to quote you a rate once they assess your pet’s individual needs.

Tell Your Groomer About Your Pet and Your Grooming Expectations
Inform the groomer about whether your pet has any anxiety about grooming and discuss any specific needs or limitations. Let them know if it's your pet's first time being groomed or if it's been a while since their last groom. A groomer should stop the groom if your pet exhibits moderate to high levels of stress or fear for the sake of your pet and future grooming. Make sure to let them know you are okay with this. A full groom for a nervous or anxious pet may take two or three visits to complete.

Bring along photos of the haircut you'd like your pet to have, and be as detailed as possible when talking about it with your groomer. If you don't know what would be the best cut for your pet, feel free to ask questions about what might be the "standard" for that breed or any ideas the groomer has. A knowledgeable groomer will listen, ask questions, and work with you to create a customized grooming plan that focuses on your dog's comfort and well-being. Whether you have a breed that needs minimal grooming or one with a dense or long coat that needs more frequent attention, remember that grooming is part of your pet’s regular care and the choice of a groomer is an important one.