

Should You Bathe Your Cat? Generally, No – Let Them Lick!

I was recently at a Nevada animal shelter where the volunteers want to bathe the cats available for adoption. The idea seemed bizarre to me. I've had cats since I began walking, and I can count on two fingers the number of times I've bathed one.



By Mark Robison

But then I got an email from a major pet store chain promoting their “cat stylists” and making the claim that cats need “bathing every 6-8 weeks to reduce dander and hair buildup.” I began to doubt my long-held beliefs against bathing cats.

So I emailed long-time cat wrangler Denise Stevens, of the Reno-based nonprofit Community Cats. She recommends against bathing cats unless “there's some medical need or, say, they're coated in motor oil.” Stevens emphasized that a bath is stressful for a cat and how this stress increases the chance of the cat becoming sick, especially at a shelter.

Bathing also dries the skin and strips the hair coat of its natural oils. Cats have barbed tongues that do a great job of cleaning their hair coat.

Cat guru Jackson Galaxy puts it this way on his website: “The truth is, there is simply no reason to bathe your cat.”

He points out that your cat – if she's healthy – already bathes all the time, which has the effect of covering herself in her own scent. A bath erases this crucial and comforting smell.

Plus the vast majority of cats hate HATE baths. “If you choose to bathe your cat regularly, you are cultivating a negative association with merely *handling* her,” Galaxy writes. This can lead to a situation where, when you go to pick up the cat, she doesn't know if it's for some love or a trip to the tub – and your cat may come to fear your touch.

Of course, there are exceptions to this no-bath rule:

- **A gunk-covered cat.** My first cat bathing experience involved a cat named Claude who'd slept under a truck leaking oil.
- **A really stinky cat.** Sometimes a stench can be so overpowering that a bath is a must. In my second cat bathing experience, I'd rescued a kitten living under a dumpster in downtown Stockton, California. She smelled like diapers and rancid kitchen grease. Cats have also been known to get sprayed by skunks.
- **A hairless cat.** A cat's skin secretes oils that are normally absorbed by their hair. Hairless cats don't have this ability so weekly bathes are needed.



- **A flea-covered cat:** This doesn't happen much in the high desert where I live, but a cat covered in fleas may need a bath with a medicated shampoo.

- **An obese or elderly cat:** Sometimes cats have physical difficulties that can keep them from reaching the parts that need cleaning. In this case, the cat might not need a full bath – just the hind end can be put in water. It also may help to shave the bum, especially for long-haired cats.

In some of the above scenarios, other options should be tried first to minimize stress for the cat. Regular brushing can help decrease mats and hairballs. If a cat has a minor mess in their hair after coming into contact with something gross, “grooming wipes” for cats and dogs are available at most pet stores. If these aren't available, baby wipes will work just fine – go for unscented.

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