

LARGE PRINT

What are hackles and why are we scared of them?

22 May 2021



Hackles (some people call them heckles) happen in birds, reptiles (called [dewlaps](#)), and mammals (like dogs and yes, humans too). So a rethink on why they can worry us, as dog owners, so much is needed.

Some of it is like ancestral memory, when we were at the mercy of any animals with big teeth,



and we all know horror stories about vicious dogs, wolves and even werewolves.



But it is far more the outpourings of what scares us into stories than the 'evil' in any dogs. However, it's hard to shake those ideas off sometimes, when the truth about hackles is far different (and perhaps not as dramatic, but far more useful to

know!)

The Science Bit

In mammals, of which dogs are one, nobody can really agree as to the exact nature of hackles. The fur can raise straight up on the back (called piloerection) of the neck and down their back! And if you've never see a dog do it before, it can be a little scary. Especially on longer haired dogs! But it's basic biology: the tiny arrector pili muscle associated with each hair follicle contracts suddenly, which makes the hair stick up. In cats, most believe they do it when they are scared.



And mammals like deer have raised hackles as they are on the attack, most naturalists agree (usually mating season.) In birds, the hackle is the group of feathers found along the back and side of the neck, and are often brightly coloured to show them off to a potential mate too. Sadly their bright colours also makes them desirable to fishermen for 'lures' to catch fish. But with each species of animal, there will be more to it than that, and dogs are no exception.

*What is agreed on however is that it is instinctive, and **they can't control the hair rising**. You could call it*

a **reflex**, like when you hit your knee and your leg twitches. And don't forget, we're mammals too and the hair on the back of our necks and arms stands up too- usually because we're scared, or suddenly shocked, and even if we're cold! And dogs can get 'goosebumps' too.

Hackles can also, according to General Adaptation Theory, be the outward sign of part of or the beginning of what we know as the 'fight or flight' response. The dog's hormonal systems kick in just like they do in humans and flood them with adrenaline, epinephrine and cortisol to help them respond to whatever has disturbed them. Their heart rate will rise; they will want to hyper-focus on the subject of their concern; and they will be hard to distract. This is the first stage when they decide if they are going to confront the problem or run away. Humans do this too.

Therefore it is vital to look at context and check your pup's body language too like the ears and tail, to try and work out what kind of hackles they are raising. For example, many dog trainers and behaviourists feel that if the hair is only up on the neck and not the back, the dog is more likely to be nervous or low in confidence than angry, and advise you to also look out for an increase in or excessive shedding as a sign of nerves. Excited hackles in play are usually but not always just on the back. Or if the hackles are patchy, like at the base of the tail and a little on the neck, can indicate confusion which can make them unpredictable so you will need to be on the ball and nip such behaviours in the bud.



Is it fear? (If so, is it yours or your pup's?)

It's often accompanied by growling, which can add to an adopter's anxiety. Stop! You are the human and the dog is looking for you to be a safe person they can trust, so while it's natural to worry about your pup if they're growling with raised fur, you need to find solutions and **not to project your fear to the dog... your dog is already scared and on high alert.**

It's so important to **keep calm**: your movements gentle but sure; your voice soft but firm so the dog can hear the 'confident, in control of the situation' you. The fact they are showing you their inner fears means they trust you to help them get away from the scary thing, and **you mustn't kill this trust they have in you.** They're showing you they need help the best way they can.

Like other dog behaviours that are often misinterpreted by humans (like bared teeth, barking and growling) **this is NOT aggression.** Dogs do not act aggressively as humans use the term; they are usually reacting to a situation that is overwhelming them, somewhere they can't escape from, and their adopters haven't noticed their low level, less obvious distressed body language. So they escalate as the stress builds

and turns into fear. And assuming it's 'aggression' and getting tense yourself, tugging the dog lead (and your tension will go down the lead) or raising your voice or even punishment is your response, then it will only get worse sometimes with tragic consequences. [Research hackles yourself so you know about them and feel confident](#) should your pup start getting a bit 'prickly'!

Is it 'dominance'?

It can be sometimes. Dogs are descended from wolves after all, who live in a cooperative society, where the top dog... er wolf is decided by their strength and 'fitness', dogs can do it to show 'dominance' over a dog they consider 'weaker'. In dogs it's more likely to be based in fear as they have been bred to function in litters or packs like working dogs, or with buddies or as solo dogs with no ill effect on their mental health, most of the time it's just huffing and puffing (medium level stress reactions) in dogs but we can't be complacent about the possibility the dog is becoming totally overwhelmed, especially if their body goes stiff and the tail wag slows, reduces in spread or stops too; and more and [more likely to snap at, lunge or even attack what is upsetting them](#). **These are final extreme behaviours because their lower level distress has been (accidentally) ignored or misunderstood by their adopters.**

Dogs from kill shelters or from the street can have been forced to develop such behaviours to survive. This is much harder to break but the earlier it's detected as they decompress and trust you enough to show you they're stressed, the better it is for the prognosis of the dog [moving through their fears, if not a complete 'cure'](#). Don't forget, you can't 'cure' the reflex of the fur rising but you can learn their stresses and together learn to deal with them.

It could mean that dog **would be better as a solo dog** with visiting or walking buddies as they'd prefer the bulk of their adopter's attention as part of their nature. But beware! This can lead to unhealthy bonding, defending in the home and on

walks, and separation anxiety. it may also mean you are restricted to a one dog household for the rest of their lives if these behaviours are not totally understood and resolved as much as is possible by the adopter. Sometimes a dog's background makes them more prone to leaping into 'top dog' mode.

But for others it could be all pretence. **They may dislike being a 'solo dog'** and are very stressed and insecure at having to do all the 'dog jobs' as they understand them in the home and when out. Either way, this is still usually a stress reaction and needs calm and careful handling by the adopter. Sometimes only getting another pup resolves it, as they need a buddy to share the 'tasks'.



Is it defence?

Raising the hackles makes any animal (but here we're talking about dogs) appear larger, which logically acts as a visual warning to other animals. The **bigger an animal looks, the less vulnerable or more strong** it will appear to others who may want to do them harm. Frogs, snakes like puff adders, male hooded seals, pufferfish (no shock there), bustards (a type of bird), male Arabian camels, and siamangs (gibbons) all actually 'inflate' a sac of skin but this is usually to try and

impress females (not always successful), or to show themselves as strong, dangerous and impressive in the case of the snakes. So yes it is defence, and a form of reassurance they are being noticed, but not necessarily as we might understand it. Dogs are doing it due to a mixture of fear and love; and they're bred to 'defend the castle' against invaders. This is true no matter the size, gender or age of the dog. All this needs to be taken into account.



Is it play?

Absolutely an excitement reflex like play can and does cause hackles to raise. The arousal hormones dogs feel during play can be overwhelming especially to a pup or a dog **who's a beginner at socialising**. Adult dogs will 'let off' a pup with some exuberant behaviour, but are likely to 'tell them off' more as they grow older. Should a dog be suddenly surprised during play or in general (like on a walk a dog or humans or squirrel suddenly come round the corner) then of course that could raise the hackles as they digest as a possible thing to play with or even a threat. Play fighting (with or without growling and visible teeth) whether the hackles are up or not are natural behaviours for a dog, so again context is vital. Always supervise your dog when they are at play, especially with a new walking buddy or resident dog and **if the hair stays raised, it could be a sign of being too stressed**, so it may be best to gently remove the dog from the situation and given processing

time. Play hackles are often but not always along the back only and not the neck.

DO

- divert them from the scary/worrying/new/confusing thing
- if using hand signals, use a 'focus' one so they look at you and not at what's bothering them
- give them another 'job' to do, like 'fetch' or 'sit' (it's harder for a dog to be reactive if seated)
- go another direction or move away or round till you can see the dog de-escalate then continue on with as loose a lead as possible,
- leave the room (even easing them out with a high value treat (but don't give it to them till they're calmer and the fur has lowered, or stays down with a brief and gentle smoothing of it with your hand))
- turn on the TV or radio if your pup likes music (not all do!) if it's off, with low, comforting residual background sounds/voices
- reboot decompression back to first stage with safe spaces and minimum engagement and stimulus
- look into getting them neutered if not already done if a boy, but some experts feel a delay in a spay for a girl is best as it can exacerbate the problem. Studies on this seem inconclusive however, so we tend to spay and neuter at between 6 and 7 months earliest unless the pup is in season or they're a recent mum.
- expert help is out there- get some if you're worried you're not doing it right. Behaviourists see this all the time and never judge.

And **DO let them process** that the scary/worrying/new/confusing thing hasn't hurt them and it never will. A blanket over their heads and shoulders or a soft comfort toy may also help (just give it to them). You can keep one in the car if it happens when you're out. If it means you don't drive home for a little while, that's ok. If it means they if at home they sleep past their

usual mealtime that's ok too; sleep is the best processor. Just give them it when they wake up and come over to you.

DON'T

- fuss them till they've processed and are visibly calmer
- play with any toy you give them until they are obviously relaxed and bring it to you
- give a treat till they're calm
- Just talk to them kindly and consistently, use hand signals if that's how you're training them that mean 'be calm' or 'it's ok, I see you'. They are already overwhelmed and adding your touch to it could lead them to fear associate with fuss. Your voice, actions to what they think is the threat or worry, and your body language, are enough.

Don't forget, some breeds are actually bred in such a way their hackles look permanently up because of the direction the hair grows, like the Rhodesian Ridgeback. **But hackles are never a reason to surrender a dog.** It does not mean they are 'vicious'; they can't control it any more than you can control a sneeze, and it means they need your help to understand what's going on. It also means **on the plus side, that they are showing you they're stressed more obviously** than a dog who doesn't get hackles (as many don't, or at least don't have noticeable ones, such as the Doodle crossbreeds) so your job as adopter is to step up and show them how to be in their new home and beyond. And getting professional advice like a trainer or behaviourist can help you to understand and destress about it as much as your pup.

Further reading:

<https://pethelpful.com/dogs/The-Function-of-a-Dogs-Hackles>

Created by:

Lora's Luck Ltd

20-22 Wenlock Road, London, N17GU
Company Number 12130277
EORI GB372394676000
VAT Number 372 3946 76

All rights reserved 2021.