



Handle with care

Dogs

Species: Domestic dog
Scientific names: *Canis familiaris*

Description

Dogs – both pedigree and mongrel (mixed breed) – come in an enormous range of sizes and temperaments. They also have a large variety of differing body and facial characteristics. In height, dogs can be as big as Irish wolfhounds and as small as Yorkshire terriers. Their coats can be smooth, wiry, long or short and come in many different colours depending on their breed and ancestry. Dogs generally have very good eyesight, acute hearing, and a keen sense of smell. All dogs are born with tails which they use to communicate, to protect their hindquarters and to help them balance. Life spans differ from breed to breed ranging from about 10 to 18 years, with small dogs usually outliving larger breeds.

Life in the wild

The dogs kept as pets today are descended from wolves which scientists believe were first kept and bred as pets about 10,000 years ago. Wild and domestic dogs are pack animals and respond to pack leaders in terms of direction for food, discipline and survival. As well as wolves, which are found in North America, northern Europe and Asia, there are species of wild dogs found in Australia, Africa, South and North America. All wild dogs are carnivores and hunt by running down their prey. They use their strong jaws and sharp teeth to tear their victim's flesh which they barely chew and then swallow in large chunks.

Source of animals

RSPCA animal centres, licensed breeders and rescue centres can all be sources of dogs and puppies in good condition. Your local veterinary surgeon may be able to advise on sources. It is important to always see a puppy with its mother as this gives owners a good picture of how well the puppy has been cared for, its temperament, eventual size and sociability. Pet shops and dealers (offering many different types of puppies for sale) are not a good source of puppies as very often different litters may be mixed and this increases the risk of disease spreading.

By buying from a pet shop or dealer you could also be supporting the cruel practice of puppy farming and it is also not possible to see a puppy with its mother. Puppies should stay with their mother until they are at least eight weeks old. If you are adopting an adult dog, a rescue centre should be able to provide important information about its background, and a full assessment as to whether the dog you want is best for you.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before keeping a dog or puppy it is crucial that any owner finds out as much as they can about dog ownership. Only then can they decide if dogs are the right pets for them and if they can provide the specialist care, time, financial means and long-term commitment to look after them properly. Before bringing the dog or puppy home, owners should make sure they have the right accommodation, food and the necessary accessories in place. They should also take the time to speak with other experienced dog owners and a vet for advice before making a final decision about dog ownership.

Although dogs can be very rewarding pets they can be very demanding – they need companionship, regular exercise and proper training. Dog ownership is a decision that involves the whole family and some dogs, due to their size and temperament, may be unsuitable for families with young children. Dogs and puppies take up a lot of time and energy, are quite expensive to look after and need plenty of space.

Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Caring for a dog is expensive. Both dogs and puppies need to be vaccinated against canine distemper, canine hepatitis, leptospirosis, canine parvovirus and kennel cough throughout their lives. They also need regular treatment for fleas and worms. Dog faeces can contain toxocara, a worm which can cause blindness in humans who come into contact with it.

Health issues to find out about:

- *Canine distemper*
- *Leptospirosis*
- *Canine parvovirus*
- *Kennel cough*
- *Fleas*
- *Worms – toxocara*

Thousands of unwanted dogs and puppies have to be humanely destroyed every year; the neutering of both males and females prevents indiscriminate breeding. Neutering will stop a female dog developing an infection of the womb; it also means that male dogs will not come calling every time she comes into season. A veterinary surgeon can advise on costs of consultations and provide information regarding care and treatment.

Microchipping – a way of permanently identifying an animal – is also recommended as a good way of re-uniting lost dogs with their owners. Insurance to cope with unforeseen veterinary care and treatment is also recommended.

Holiday cover may be difficult and expensive to arrange, but dogs need to be looked after every day while their owners are away. There are various boarding facilities which look after dogs, but you may have a reliable friend or neighbour who understands a dog's complex needs and is prepared to take your pet into their own home and look after it.

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

A healthy dog or puppy will be alert and bright-eyed, with no signs of discharge around its eyes, mouth and nostrils. Its breathing should be quiet and even with no coughing. A healthy dog's skin will be clean, with no lumps, bumps and signs of inflammation. Its coat should be clean, glossy and free from parasites, loose hairs and dirt. There should be no signs of diarrhoea around its tail. A healthy dog is an alert, active dog – responsive to sounds and the world around it. There should be no signs of limping and it should have clean teeth – free from tartar – and strong gums.

Why are dogs vulnerable as pets?

Dogs are completely dependent on their owners to look after them properly and provide them with food, water, companionship, protection, exercise and veterinary care. Although dogs can be very rewarding pets they can be very demanding – they need companionship, regular exercise and proper training. Dogs can also shed their fur and make a mess of furniture and floors and not all owners are able to accept this. Some owners get puppies on impulse and then find they cannot cope with an adult dog that no longer looks so appealing, may make a mess and needs so much attention.

Handling/transporting the animal home

A puppy can be lifted by scooping it up gently with one hand under the chest. A dog should be lifted by standing sideways to it and taking the weight of the chest and hindquarters in both arms. Dogs which are being crate trained can travel in a crate, although some can travel in harnesses. Puppies are best transported in pet carriers. Dogs should never be left in a parked car on warm days even with the windows open – temperatures inside cars rise very quickly and they could literally roast to death.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Dogs should not be left on their own for any more than four hours a day otherwise they will become lonely and destructive. Regular feeding and a balanced diet are essential ingredients for a happy, healthy dog. They need lots of high quality protein, fat and carbohydrates which can either be given in the form of pre-prepared foods and biscuits, available from pet shops and supermarkets, or as fresh food. Good quality meat can be fed raw, but other meat should be cooked before feeding it. Cooked bones should not be given because they can splinter – sterilized marrow bones available from pet shops are a better option. Fresh water should always be available.

Dogs need their own bed and blanket or crate in a quiet corner of a room, but where they can see comings and goings and feel part of things. Their bed should be kept out of draughts and their bedding should be aired every day and washed or replaced every week. They need a well-fenced garden that they can exercise and play in and owners who are prepared to clean up after them to prevent the spread of disease.

Dogs should be brushed every day to keep their coats in good condition and their teeth should be kept clean. Toilet training and obedience training is essential. Without obedience training, dogs can become a danger to themselves, their owners and the public. Veterinary surgeons can give advice on training courses in your area. Dogs must have a collar and lead with an identity tag.

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.