

How to Choose a Dog

By Sherry Woodard

If you're thinking about getting a dog and you've never had one, please do some research first. Learn about what's involved in having a dog – basic dog care, medical needs, training and behavior. In particular, ask yourself the following:

- Do I have the time to give a dog the love and attention she deserves?
- Can I offer her daily exercise and interaction with people and other dog friends?
- Can I afford the costs of having a dog (food, routine vet care, and possible additional medical costs, such as medication)?
- Are my emotional expectations realistic? (A dog is not a furry little person.)
- Will she be living in the house as a valued family member? (Dogs are pack animals and don't do well living alone outside.)



Should I get a puppy?

One of the first questions that people ask themselves is whether to get a puppy. Lots of people don't realize that puppies need almost constant attention. Do you have the time or the inclination to raise a puppy? If you're gone for long periods of time, are you willing to pay for daycare or a sitter? Do you have the time to properly train your puppy? All puppies and dogs need to learn how to be well-behaved family members.

To grow into emotionally balanced and safe dogs, puppies must also be socialized. They must be trained to act appropriately in different settings – around children and other animals, on busy city streets, in parks, around people who are strangers.

Other considerations when getting a puppy: Think about how big he'll be and how active he'll be when he grows up. If you live in an apartment in a city, a large dog may not be the best choice. If you're a couch potato, you may want an older or more sedentary dog.

Should I get a purebred dog?

The next question people usually ask is whether they should get a purebred dog. If you decide that you want a purebred, please investigate the different breeds carefully before choosing a dog. Dog breeds vary quite a bit in their temperament, the amount of exercise they require, and the amount of care (e.g., grooming) they might need.

Almost every dog breed was created for a specific purpose – hunting, herding, and guarding are examples. Knowing the characteristics of the breed can help you decide whether a dog of a particular breed will fit into your family's lifestyle. Your plain old mutt is actually a much more adaptable dog for the way that most people live today, since most people don't need a dog who excels at hunting or herding!

Also, mutts are often healthier animals, because of “hybrid vigor”; many purebred dogs have breed-specific health problems. For example, Labradors often suffer from hip and elbow dysplasia, and Chihuahas can have heart problems and hypoglycemia.

Where should I get my dog?

There are many wonderful dogs (including purebreds) at your local shelter. Statistics show that 25 percent of dogs in shelters are purebred animals. When you choose one of these dogs, you often get the added bonus of knowing that you have saved a life.

We don't recommend that you buy an animal from a pet store. Most pet stores buy from puppy mills and “backyard breeders” – people who are just in it for the money and often don't care about the health or well-being of the dogs.

If you decide to purchase a purebred dog from a breeder, do some research and choose a reputable breeder. All dog breeders are not alike – the top-quality breeders work hard to produce genetically healthy, emotionally sound puppies. They have an interest in ensuring that each puppy has a happy life. Good breeders have a return policy if the puppy turns out to be unhealthy; they offer support if you have questions or concerns. Some spay or neuter all their puppies to ensure that careless breeding will not occur.

Some questions to ask to determine if you are dealing with a responsible breeder:

- Can you visit their facility and see all their dogs? (If so, is the facility clean and airy? Do the dogs seem healthy and happy?)
- Are they knowledgeable about the breed they are selling?
- Do they show their dogs? (The best breeders are serious about their breed and want to show quality dogs who exhibit the best of the breed's standards, and who are healthy and well cared for.)
- Do they belong to breed clubs? (Belonging to breed clubs also shows commitment to the quality of the dogs.)
- Do they breed more than one breed of dog? (If so, breeding for profit may be their main motivation.)
- Have they tested their breeding dogs for genetic problems?

Getting a dog from a breed rescue group is another option to consider if you have decided upon a particular breed. These groups rescue purebred dogs that have been given up, for one reason or another, and find new homes for them. Some breeders also do rescue for their breed. To find a rescue group for the breed you're interested in, do a search on the Internet (for example, search for “dachshund rescue”).

If you feel that you are ready for a lifetime commitment to a dog, do your homework and ask lots of questions. If you ever have problems with your dog's health, training or behavior, get professional help from a veterinarian, trainer or behaviorist.

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