

## Bichon Family Basics

**What kind of grooming regimen should you expect when owning one of the Bichon breeds?**

*By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG*

**Q.** I recently lost a rescued female Bichon Frisé dog after a very long medical history and many bad breeder experiences. I would love to have another Bichon as my first choice, but I don't have time for the high-maintenance grooming or medical problems that arise. Is there one dog in the Bichon family such as a Coton de Tulear, Maltese, Havanese, etc., that would require any less maintenance and have less medical problems?

**A.** The six Bichon breeds, all descendants of the “little white dog of antiquity” — also known as the “Barbet,” can be traced as far back as the Roman Empire. Differing in appearance and personality, each was developed in a Mediterranean port city and reached the world beyond through traders and sailors. The breeds were also regarded as treasured gifts by the nobility of the ancient world.

Your “bad breeder experiences” may sum up the source of your pet’s health problems. No matter what breed you aspire to bring into your family, it is vital to find a reputable breeder who is honest about his or her dogs’ lineage, offers health certifications, and is open to working with you should problems arise.

The Bichon Frisé, Bolognese, and Havanese are doublecoated breeds, having a topcoat and undercoat, while the Coton de Tulear, Lowchen, and Maltese are singlecoated. All are non-shedding and hypoallergenic, making them good choices for allergy sufferers, but none can be considered low-maintenance as far as grooming is concerned.

Thirty-second in popularity according to AKC registrations, the Bichon Frisé belongs to the Non-Sporting Group, a compact and loveable dog whose ancestors came to the Canary Islands with Spanish sailors. During the Renaissance, Italian traders took the little white dog home to Italy where it attracted the attention of nobility and wealthy merchants.

Finding its way to France in the late 1400s, the Bichon became the darling of royalty — a status it enjoyed well into Napoleon’s rule. Because the Bichon was seen as a symbol of the aristocracy during the French Revolution, it was tossed out on its ear, surviving as a street performer with organ grinders and in the circus.

With its downy undercoat and springy topcoat curls, the Bichon’s beauty is accentuated by the way it is groomed: scissor-sculpted to accentuate its roundness, its shimmering whiteness contrasted by its dark eyes and jet-black nose and lips. Without brushing several times a week to remove dead hair and prevent matting, skin problems will develop.

The Bolognese sports fluffy waves that require daily brushing if left full, as it is presented in the show ring. It was a favorite with Russian nobles where servants saved it from extinction during the Russian Revolution. American fanciers imported a Bolognese from Russia in 1991 to breed with specimens gathered in Europe, resuscitating the breed fairly recently. Despite its small size, it is self-important, relishing the role of family watchdog. Not yet recognized by the AKC, it is registered with the Federation Cynologique Internationale (FCI), the Kennel Club of Great Britain (KCGB), the United Kennel Club (UKC), and the Rare Breed Network.

The Coton de Tulear is shown in the Non-Sporting Class for rare breeds in this country as well as in the FCI. It was imported to Madagascar during the 17th century where it found favor in the port of Tulear — a haven for pirates and slave traders. Protected by tribal rulers, the dog became known as the Royal Dog of Madagascar. Currently threatened by political and economic conditions in its island home, it came to the United States in 1974.

Currently recognized by the Continental Kennel Club (CKC), the FCI, and the National Kennel Club (NKC), its name is French for “cotton,” which is the perfect description for its soft, fluffy coat. Requiring brushing several times a week, the Coton de Tulear is not scissored for the show ring, but owners often opt for a shorter trim. The Coton de Tulear comes in three colors: white, black, and white and tri-colored, and makes a perfect house pet.

The Havanese is the Cuban member of the family and is a small, sturdy, long-coated, drop-eared dog with a spunky personality. Brought to Cuba during the Spanish Empire, these feisty characters are short-legged and muscular, longer than they are tall. Their double coats have a light texture and are traditionally unclipped, requiring brushing and combing several times a week. A fun-loving pet, the Havanese is rising fast in popularity and comes in a variety of colors.

The Lowchen or “little lion dog,” is named for its haircut and has been known in Europe since the 1500s. Loveable and cheerful, the Lowchen was the favorite of Florentine nobility during the 15th century where ladies of the court took to grooming it to resemble a little lion. The breed was brought back from near extinction by a dedicated Belgian fancier after World War I. Untrimmed, the Lowchen’s silky single coat is long and wavy, requiring frequent attention to keep mats at bay. Available in a variety of colors, the Lowchen looks adorably unique when trimmed like a little lion with its full ruff and mane, shorn hindquarters, and tufted tail.

The Maltese is the smallest family member and toy dog weighing 4 to 6 pounds. Named for the Isle of Malta where it was introduced by Phoenician traders, this ancient breed was represented on Egyptian artifacts dating back to 600 B.C., and may have been worshipped by that culture. Its regal coat is long, silky, straight, hangs to floor level, and needs daily combing and brushing unless kept shorter. With its hair pulled back in two topknots and parted down the middle of its back, the Maltese must be pampered by its owners. It came to the U.S. in 1877 and is a cherished companion, as well as a stunning show dog.