

Popular Dogs: Bichon Frise

Although owners tend to pamper their Bichons, the dogs are tougher than they look.

Eve Adamson

Rub-a-Dub ... MudThe Bichon is easy to obedience-train with positive-reinforcement methods such as a food-based reward system. But like many small breeds, they can be a challenge to housetrain. "The biggest reason Bichons come into rescue is because people haven't made the commitment to housebreak them," Antetomaso said. "People need to combine consistency, firmness and kindness, the way they would if potty-training a child. You have to make the commitment to do it all the way."

Grooming is one of the greatest challenges of owning a Bichon. Proper Bichon grooming requires a thorough shampoo and rinse, combing out the curly coat while blowing it dry, then clipping. When Hensley tried to do the job, she discovered Kernal Bean disliked the sound of the clippers. Kernal Bean ended up half-shaved, with no hair on his head. Hensley took him to a professional groomer the next time.

Grooming can cost more for a Bichon than for other breeds and should be done every four to five weeks. "They are white and cute, and unfortunately they love to play in the mud," Beauchamp said. "Their favorite time to dig holes is right after they've had a bath."

The breed benefits from weekly brushing with a slicker brush and occasional bathing between professional grooming sessions. The hair around the eyes should be wiped daily to reduce tear staining. Because white-coated breeds often have skin allergies, bathe Bichons carefully. "New owners bathing their dogs must remember one rule: Rinse, rinse, rinse!" Williams said. "Any remaining shampoo or conditioner can be irritating." Antihistamines, special bathing products and attention to flea control can reduce allergic reactions.

In addition to skin allergies, some Bichons suffer from kneecap dislocation, bladder infections and stones, ear infections, eye diseases such as juvenile cataracts, excessive tartar and early tooth loss. Potential Bichon owners should make sure a puppy's parents are registered with the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (to determine the health of hips and knees) and the Canine Eye Research Foundation (to determine the health of eyes). Dental care should include brushing two or three times a week, yearly professional tartar removal and a diet of dry kibble. Bichons love to eat, but obesity leads to joint problems, liver disease and pancreatitis.

Despite these problems, Bichons live an average of 15 to 16 years. Jones has a 19-year-old Bichon and knows of one that lived 20 years.

In the show ring, Bichons' plush, beautiful coats catch the eye. "Given the proper show coat, a Bichon's structure and associated movement are what make a 'special' stand out," Williams said. "A beautiful Bichon with proper coat and gorgeous head which has that wonderful reach and drive is hard for any judge to deny."

Temperament also distinguishes the Bichon from other breeds. "I think a lot of judges, particularly in the group ring, are paying attention to the temperament," Antetomaso said. "That little bit of playful, Bichon-ie attitude can really make a difference."

Bichon personality wins championships and hearts. "Kernal always keeps me in a good mood," Hensley said. "He actually listens to me. He'll move his head when I talk, like he is confirming that what I have to say is important."

For those ready to love and be loved around the clock, a Bichon might be the perfect match. "All Bichons deserve to be somebody's baby," Antetomaso said. Who could help spoiling them just a little?