

Puppy Health Checklist

Know what questions to ask before you make a commitment.

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That fuzzy, doe-eyed puppy bounding up to you so gleefully couldn't look any healthier. You did your research to find a reputable breeder, and you'd like to just make the decision and get this puppy home as soon as possible. But wait one minute ... what do you know about this particular puppy's DNA? What might an orthopedic X-ray reveal? And how sound is that heart muscle?

Every dog, from purebreds to mixed breeds, can suffer from genetic disease. What's more, in many cases, these diseases — some more common than others — won't show up for several years. Conditions like hip dysplasia, spinal disk ruptures, eye diseases, epilepsy, and heart, liver, and kidney disease can spell disaster for happy family pets and the people who love them. Is there anything you can do to ensure that the little puppy you are cradling in your arms is one that will live a long and healthy life?

Yes! Genotypic (DNA) tests and phenotypic tests (based on what a veterinarian can see, via X-ray or other media) can predict future health problems. Yet, because every breed is prone to different genetic diseases, you can't just bring a short list of diseases and conditions to your breeder and say, Have your puppies been tested for these? You'll need to do a little research to find out the specific diseases and conditions your breed may develop, and then discuss them in detail with your breeder. Here are some general questions, however, that you can ask to get started: What genetic diseases occur in this breed? The breeder should know the answer and be honest about occurrence of disease in his or her breed. No breed is always free of genetic disease.

What health tests have you had done on these puppies and their parents? Responsible breeders pay to have relevant health tests performed, plain and simple. Common ones include certified hips through the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals and eyes certified free of progressive retinal atrophy through the Canine Eye Registration Foundation.

What health problems have you experienced in your lines? Every breeder with any experience has seen some, so don't believe the claim that the breeder has never encountered genetic disease. For example, dogs with long backs such as Dachshunds, Skye Terriers, and Pekingese are prone to intervertebral disk disease. Dalmatians are prone to deafness. Small breeds can be prone to slipped knee problems and Legg-Calves-Perthes, a degenerative bone disease.

Are you registered with CHIC? A no isn't a bad thing because the Canine Health Information Center (CHIC) is brand new, but this online database collects information on individual purebred dogs and publishes which health tests they have had and the results. If your breeder registers pups with CHIC, you can look up each pup and see if it is prone to diseases.