

The Surprising Dark Side of These Popular Dog Breeds

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Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent study out of Hungary discusses the huge popularity of flat-faced (brachycephalic) dog breeds, despite their numerous significant innate diseases
- The researchers learned that the dogs' enormous appeal isn't necessarily associated with their tendency to make eye contact with their humans; they also learned that most flat-faced dog fans are well aware of their many health challenges
- A significant discovery from the study was the tendency of owners of these dogs to normalize their pet's health conditions, such as breathing difficulties
- A 2012 study found a similar phenomenon — pet parents of brachy dogs tend to minimize/normalize their health struggles

These days, it's widely known that **flat-faced (brachycephalic) dogs** come with a long list of innate diseases, including breathing difficulties, eye problems, and the need for C-section delivery of litters. These poor dogs typically live three to four years less than other breeds of similar body size; the life expectancy of French Bulldogs is only around 4.5 years.

However, in spite of their health struggles, French and English bulldogs, along with Pugs and Boston Terriers, are among the most popular breeds in both the U.S. and Europe. Recently, a team of Hungarian researchers set out to discover why. The results of their study were published recently in the journal Applied Animal Behaviour Science.¹

Fans of Flat-Faced Dogs Are Aware of Their Health Issues

The researchers hypothesized that 1) since flat-faced breeds tend to make eye contact with humans, the trait is appealing to owners, and 2) fans of the dogs might not actually be aware of their innate health issues.²

The research team developed an online survey that showed 25 pairs of photos of dogs looking at the camera and looking away. They also assessed the 1,156 survey respondents' personality traits, whether they liked flat-faced dogs, and whether they were aware of their health issues.

Some of the results contradicted the researchers' hypotheses. For example, the survey takers who liked flat-faced breeds randomly selected among the images, suggesting that despite the fact that these dogs tend to make eye contact, it may not play a role in their popularity.

The respondents who selected photos of dogs looking into the camera tended to be sociable, made friends easily, and were able to see things from the position and perspective of others.

Perhaps most surprisingly, the people who liked flat-faced dogs turned out to be the most aware of their health struggles. In fact, 99% of survey takers knew of the dogs' breathing difficulties, 90% were familiar with litter delivery issues, and 61% knew about the tendency toward corneal ulceration. Only a few of the respondents associated the dogs with less than four health problems. These results clearly suggest the general public is very much aware of the dogs' health struggles.

Dog Owners Tend to 'Normalize' Their Pet's Health Problems

The survey results also revealed that the flat-faced dog fans, as compared to the respondents who were either neutral or disliked the breeds, tend to be younger, with lower levels of education, and little to no professional experience with dogs. They were more likely to be women with children vs. the neutral group and have higher emotional empathy vs. the group that disliked flat-faced breeds.

"We expected that one of the main attractiveness of flat-faced dogs lies in their large eyes and that their owners would be delighted when the dogs look at them," said study author Eniko Kubinyi, head of the MTA-ELTE 'Momentum' Companion Animal Research Group at ELTE.

"However, we did not find this to be true, at least not from the photographs. It is also not true that enthusiasts of flat-faced breeds are unaware of the dogs' health problems or are insensitive to their emotions. On the other hand, it has been revealed that they are relatively inexperienced dog owners.

Thus, it is most likely that they are unaware of the dogs' communication signals, may not necessarily recognize signs of pain, and likely consider health problems as normal breed characteristics. For example, a snoring and grunting Bulldog appears cute to them, rather than sick and struggling for breath."³

Study co-author Zsófia Bognár adds:

"In many countries, there are awareness campaigns about the health issues of flat-faced breeds. However, the growing popularity of flat-faced dogs suggests that these campaigns are not very effective. It is clear that simply listing the health problems does not deter people from purchasing these dogs.

Instead, the emphasis should be on highlighting that health issues should not be considered normal or acceptable characteristics because they often cause pain and suffering for the dogs. Dog owners need to be made aware that their choices play a significant role in shaping the health of dog breeds."

In the end, the research team concluded that although flat-faced dog fans are aware of their health issues and strive to provide the best for their dogs, they are likely to normalize health problems.

Much Earlier Study Also Found Normalization of Health Issues

A study conducted over a decade ago uncovered a similar phenomenon among pet parents of flat-faced dogs: they mistake significant breathing difficulties for normal respiratory sounds.⁴

The Royal Veterinary College at the University of London conducted a survey of the owners of 285 dogs who brought their pets to the Queen Mother Hospital for Animals for various reasons during a five-month period.

Thirty-one of the 285 dogs, including Boston Terriers, Bulldogs, Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, French Bulldogs, Pekingese, and Pugs, had been diagnosed with brachycephalic airway syndrome, a condition that includes a number of upper respiratory problems affecting the nose, mouth, and throat of dogs (and some cats) as a result of abnormal skull structure.

Like the Hungarian research team, the Royal Veterinary College researchers were surprised to learn that despite the dogs' owners reporting significant respiratory symptoms, they did not believe their pets had breathing problems.

Flat-faced brachycephalic dogs have constricted upper jaws, which causes the soft tissue to be compressed within the skull. Many of these dogs develop brachycephalic airway syndrome. Signs of the condition include noisy or labored breathing, gagging, choking, problems breathing with even minor physical exertion, and a tendency to overheat.

Every owner of a brachy said their dog snored — some even while awake — compared with fewer than 2% of non-brachycephalic dogs. But well over half the owners did not believe their pet had breathing difficulties, even though the majority of dogs had problems during exercise.

According to researchers, this indicates many owners of pets with brachycephalic airway syndrome don't realize a problem exists and don't seek help from a veterinarian. According to Rowena Packer of the Royal Veterinary College and one of the study authors:

*"Our study clearly shows that owners of brachycephalic dogs often dismiss the signs of this potentially severe breathing disorder as normal and are prepared to tolerate a high degree of respiratory compromise in their pets before seeking help. It may require a particularly acute attack, such as the dog losing consciousness, for owners to perceive a problem."*⁵

Many owners who were surveyed seemed to believe breathing difficulties aren't really a problem if the dog is short-muzzled. One owner's comment: "No to breathing problem — other than being a Bulldog."

Dr. Charlotte Burn, lead researcher, warns that while short muzzles may be appealing-looking, owners of brachy breeds need to be aware the cute appearance often comes at a serious price to the dog. "Just because a problem is common, that doesn't make it less of a problem for the individuals who suffer it," says Burn.⁶

Helping Your Flat-Faced Dog Breathe Better

Breathing difficulties can prevent your pet from being able to enjoy the very simplest things dogs naturally love to do, like eating, sleeping, play and exercise. Dogs with severe brachycephalic airway syndrome can have almost continuous difficulty getting enough air. It's not unusual for these dogs to collapse from lack of oxygen. Left untreated, the problems tend to progress over time, with worsening symptoms.

The Royal Veterinary College researchers encourage parents of brachycephalic breeds to learn the difference between normal and abnormal breathing sounds in their dogs, and to make an appointment with a veterinarian if they notice any unusual breathing or other signs of respiratory distress.

Unfortunately, **surgery** is often the only option to resolve significant breathing difficulties resulting from brachycephalic airway syndrome. The treatment goal is to surgically remove the tissues or structures causing airway obstruction.

Things you can do include keeping your dog fit and trim. **Overweight and obese dogs** have much more serious respiratory difficulties than pets who are kept at an ideal weight.

Keeping your dog out of hot, humid environments is also important to support normal respiration and prevent overheating. And since stress exacerbates virtually every health problem, especially breathing difficulties, keeping your dog's life as stress-free as possible is also recommended to support your pet's health and quality of life.

Obviously the most logical way to avoid all of these heartbreaking issues is to only support the breeding of genetically more diverse dogs whose parents have healthy physiology, which means breeders must be able to successfully answer the tough questions on my **20 point breeder questionnaire**.

Sources and References

¹ [Bognar, Z. and Kubinyli, E. Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Volume 264, July 2023](#)

^{2,3} [Phys.org, June 6, 2023](#)

⁴ [Packer, R.M.A. et al. May 2012, Animal Welfare 21\(S1\):81-93](#)

^{5,6} [Phys.org, May 10, 2012](#)
