

Why Are These Popular Dogs Dying So Much Younger Than They Used To?

This dog breed has shed a stunning three years off its normal lifespan in the past decade. What's going on? Others have too, but not that much. Plus, if you're considering one of these dogs, here's how to pre-determine how healthy your new pet might be.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent study of pedigree dogs in the U.K. reveals a significant decrease in longevity over the last 10 years, with the Bull Terrier losing a full 3 years of lifespan
- Some experts blame the change on closed gene pools, popular sires, and dogs judged on looks vs. health. I believe highly processed pet food diets, various toxins, and assorted environmental influences also play a role
- According to a University of California, Davis study, mixed breeds aren't necessarily any healthier than purebreds, and carry many of the same genetic disorders

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Most dog guardians wonder from time to time what illnesses might befall our pet in the future, or **how many years we'll have with our furry companion**. Most of us don't dwell on these unsettling questions, but they do cross our minds once in awhile.

Recently in the U.K., the Kennel Club (which is the British version of the AKC — the American Kennel Club) released a report called the Pedigree Breed Health Survey, which provides a bit of insight for curious owners of purebred dogs.

The 2014 Pedigree Breed Health Survey is the largest of its kind to date, sent to 385,000 owners of 215 different breeds. Responses were received from owners of 191 breeds, representing over 43,000 living dogs and over 5,600 deceased dogs.¹

Survey Reveals Shocking Decline in Lifespan of Many Breeds

According to the 2014 survey results:

- Over 65% of dogs were disease-free (I think the reality is that at the time of the survey, the owners were unaware of any illnesses in their pet, as it's highly unlikely two-thirds of the dogs represented in the survey had zero health issues)
- The most common disorders were lipomas (benign fatty tumors), skin cysts, allergic skin disorders, arthritis, and ear infections

- The most common causes of death were "old age," unspecified types of cancer, unknown conditions, heart failure, and kidney failure

The 2014 survey also found that tragically, the average lifespan of a pedigree dog in the U.K. is just 10 years. In a 2004 Kennel Club report, the average was 11 years, 3 months.

This means the median longevity of Britain's purebred dogs has dropped by 11% in just a decade. The breeds with the most shocking lifespan decreases:²

Breed	2004 Lifespan	2014 Lifespan
Bull Terriers	10 years	7 years
Beagles	12 years, 8 months	10 years
Doberman Pinschers	10 years, 6 months	8 years
Dalmatians	12 years, 6 months	11 years
Border Terriers	14 years	12 years
Irish Wolfhounds	7 years	6 years, 6 months
Rhodesian Ridgebacks	11 years	9 years
Bulldogs	6 years, 3 months	6 years
Boxers	10 years, 3 months	9 years
Cavaliers	11 years, 5 months	10 years
Irish Setters	12 years	11 years
Whippets	12 years, 4 months	10 years
Labrador Retrievers	12 years, 3 months	11 years

Why Are Purebred Dogs in the U.K. Dying Younger?

According to Dr. Pete Wedderburn, writing for the Telegraph:

*"It seems strange that in this era of improved nutrition and better medical care, dogs are living shorter lives."*³

I have to disagree with Wedderburn if his definition of "improved nutrition" is processed pet food. If you couple a lifetime of eating biologically inappropriate food with ...

"Closed gene pools ... obsession with purity ... popular sires ... dogs being judged on looks not health ... and the erroneous belief that breeders can health-test their way out of trouble."

As described by Jemima Harrison, writing for Pedigree Dogs Exposed,⁴ it's really not strange at all. Especially when you add common environmental stressors and toxins to the mix. (Harrison is also the producer of the **BBC's Pedigree Dogs Exposed**.)

According to the Kennel Club survey results, the main cause of death in the U.K.'s pedigree dogs is "old age." In 2004, 17.8% of dogs died of old age, but in 2014, the number had dropped to 13.8%.

Harrison says based on these statistics, an appropriate survey results headline should read, "More than 85% of KC registered dogs today do not make it to old age — and almost all die, or are put to sleep, because of disease." Per Harrison, the new revelations from the survey shouldn't come as a surprise:

"Despite frequent claims by many that dogs are living longer today than ever before," she says, "it has been pretty obvious that an increasing number of breeds are tottering on the brink of viability. It does not, however, make the findings any less heartbreaking for everyone who loves dogs."

Are Mutts Healthier Than Purebred Dogs?

Many people feel mixed breeds are healthier than purebreds. One of the reasons for this notion is that when two or more breeds are blended together, there's less risk a dog will inherit breed-specific diseases.

The idea that mutts are healthier makes a certain amount of sense when you consider the poor breeding practices of puppy mill operators and many AKC-associated breeders as well. There's excessive focus on breeding animals for certain physical characteristics, and entirely too little attention paid to selecting dogs for health and longevity.

The belief that breed-blending creates healthier dogs is part of the reason "designer dogs" like Goldendoodles, Morkies and Puggles have become so popular. It's also why breeders are able to ask inflated prices for dogs that aren't purebred.

But are mixed and designer breeds really healthier? Not according to what many veterinarians see in their practices, and not according to a five-year study of veterinary cases at the University of California (UC), Davis. This research indicates that mixed breeds don't automatically have an advantage when it comes to genetic disorders.⁵

Genetic Disorders Also Occur in Mixed Breeds

The UC Davis researchers looked at the records of over 90,000 purebred and mixed breed dogs that had been patients at the university's veterinary medical teaching hospital between 1995 and 2010. Designer dogs were included in the study, since crossbreeding is presumed to reduce or eliminate genetic disorders like **hypothyroidism**, epilepsy, hip dysplasia and cancer.

Of the 90,000 records reviewed, 27,254 involved dogs with at least one of 24 genetic disorders, including various types of cancers, heart disease, endocrine system dysfunction, orthopedic conditions, allergies, bloat, cataracts, eye lens problems, epilepsy and liver disease.

According to the study, the prevalence of 13 of the 24 genetic disorders was about the same for purebreds as mixed breeds. Some of those disorders were hip dysplasia, hyper- and hypoadrenocorticism, cancers, lens luxation and patellar luxation.

Ten conditions were found more frequently among purebred dogs, including dilated cardiomyopathy, elbow dysplasia, cataracts, and hypothyroidism. One disorder was actually more common in mixed-breeds — cranial cruciate ligament ruptures. The researchers concluded that overall, the prevalence of genetic disorders among purebred and mixed-breed dogs depends on the specific condition.

The UC Davis study data also suggests breeds that share a similar lineage are more prone to certain inherited disorders. Four of the five breeds most commonly affected with elbow dysplasia were the Bernese Mountain Dog, the Newfoundland, the Mastiff, and the Rottweiler, which are all from mastiff-like lineage.

This suggests these breeds share gene mutations for elbow dysplasia as the result of having a common ancestor. The flip side of the coin is that disorders that occur in both mixed breeds and purebreds seem to originate from well-established gene mutations that have spread throughout the dog population. These disorders include hip dysplasia, tumor-causing cancers, and hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.

Is a Purebred Dog in Your Future?

If you're thinking about purchasing a purebred puppy, I've developed a method to help you determine how healthy your new pet may be. Investigating the lifestyle of your prospective puppy's parents through questions posed to the breeder can give you excellent insight into the health of your pup and his littermates.

[You can find the questionnaire here](#). These questions are intended to determine how committed the breeder is to the well-being of his or her dogs and their litters. If a breeder can't or won't answer these questions about the parents of the puppy you're considering, I recommend you find another breeder.

Sources and References

¹ [Pedigree Breed Health Survey 2014](#)

^{2,4} [Pedigree Dogs Exposed](#)

³ [The Telegraph, February 29, 2016](#)

⁵ [JAVMA, Vol 242, No. 11, June 1, 2013](#)
