

# Can All Dogs Swim? The Surprising Truth About Our Furry Friends

While many believe all dogs are natural swimmers, this article exposes the risks of such assumptions by exploring breed-specific swimming skills and the need for careful water introduction.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Not all dogs are natural swimmers; breed, body structure and their own experiences with or exposure to water all factor in to whether or not they can swim — and whether or not they enjoy it
- Breeds with short legs and long bodies, like dachshunds, or breeds with flat faces, known as brachycephalic breeds, such as bulldogs and pugs, often find swimming challenging
- Medium-to-large sized breeds with water-resistant coats and webbing between their toes are typically strong swimmers; breeds that tend to love the water include Newfoundlands, standard poodles, Portuguese water dogs and Labrador retrievers
- Regardless of breed, it's important to introduce your dog to water gradually and in a controlled environment
- Even if your dog is a seasoned swimmer, don't leave him unattended; also, recognize that some dogs may never enjoy swimming and shouldn't be forced to do so

It's a myth that all dogs can swim, and you should never simply drop your dog into a pool or other body of water to test out his swimming abilities. The truth is that not all dogs are natural swimmers. Breed, body structure and their own experiences with or exposure to water all factor in to whether or not they can swim — and whether or not they enjoy it.

While some dogs take to water instinctively and love swimming, others may be hesitant, struggle to stay afloat or even fear water. It's important to take not only your dog's size and breed into account but also his individual preferences when taking your dog for a swim.

## Certain Dog Breeds Are Natural Swimmers — Others Are Not

Breeds with short legs and long bodies, like dachshunds, or breeds with flat faces, known as **brachycephalic breeds**, such as bulldogs and pugs, often find swimming challenging. It can be difficult for these breeds to keep their noses above water and maintain buoyancy.

"Dogs with heavy bones, wide chests, and short hair — Dobermans, Rottweilers, Bulldogs — generally don't float well, so they tend to paddle with only their front legs and not go forward through the water. Thus, they sink, hind end first, which only adds to their panic," according to Whole Dog Journal.<sup>1</sup> Small breeds may also need assistance in the water, as they get easily chilled and may be frightened of the water.

“Most Chihuahuas ... do not like water — because they have no fur and get cold — and they can’t swim — because their pads are so small. Plus, their tiny stature means they can be swept away by waves or currents,” Whole Dog Journal added.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, medium-to-large sized breeds with water-resistant coats and webbing between their toes are typically strong swimmers. Some dog breeds that tend to love the water include Newfoundlands, standard poodles, Portuguese water dogs and Labrador retrievers.

“Dogs with thick or long coats and lighter builds — Labs and Golden Retrievers — float more easily and stay warm in cold water. And the Newfoundland has giant, webbed paws that propel him purposely through the water, helping to make the breed outstanding at water rescue,” Whole Dog Journal reported.<sup>3</sup>

## How to Introduce Your Dog to Water

Regardless of breed, it’s important to introduce your dog to water gradually and in a controlled environment. Not all dogs will enjoy swimming, and forcing your dog into water can be traumatic and increase their fear or anxiety.

If your dog is a puppy, safely exposing him to water in a **fear-free manner** between the ages of 6 to 16 weeks can help him to get used to it and develop positive associations with being in the water.<sup>4</sup> If your dog is older and new to the water, take it slow, starting with just a few inches of water to get his feet wet — a baby pool or even a bathtub can work well for this.

Once your dog is comfortable in a few inches of water, you can gradually go deeper. Use praise and treats to reward him as he ventures into the water, and stay by his side in case he needs assistance. If possible, find a location where your dog can wade in gradually. Once your dog is comfortable in the water, it’s time to move on to actual swimming.

## Most Dogs Swim With a Dog Paddle

Interestingly, while different dog breeds vary in how they walk or run on land, most dogs swim using the same type of dog paddle. The swimming move has two main parts: the “power phase,” where the dog pushes its paw back through the water, spreading its toes to grab more water, and the “recovery phase,” where it pulls its leg forward again, getting ready for the next push.

“The modified terrestrial gait used for swimming by dogs appears to be stereotypic among breeds, whereas terrestrial locomotion in dogs shows substantial variation in gait,” researchers wrote in *The Anatomical Record*.<sup>5</sup> This is likely because when they’re in water, they don’t have to deal with gravity or the ground in the same way as when they’re walking or running on land.

Either way, while your dog is learning to swim, support him under his midsection until he seems confident and is using all four limbs to swim. Speak to him in a positive, calm voice and continue to offer praise and floating toys as he swims about.

# How to Keep Your Dog Safe in the Water

Using life jackets designed for dogs can provide additional safety and buoyancy for dogs learning to swim or those that aren't strong swimmers. Anytime your dog is swimming in a natural body of water such as a lake or the ocean, I recommend using a life jacket with a handle to protect him from strong currents or steep drop-offs.

You can attach a leash or long line to the life jacket (or to a harness) so you can pull your dog in if he gets distracted or cannot reach the shore on his own. Even if your dog is a seasoned swimmer, don't leave him unattended and remember that swimming takes a lot of physical energy.

Your dog may tire quickly, so don't allow him to swim too far from shore. In a swimming pool, install a ramp for your dog to use as an exit and teach him how to use it. Pools should also be fenced so your dog can't fall in accidentally. When around water, always encourage your dog to drink fresh water before and during swimming to prevent them from drinking pool, salt or dirty water, which can be harmful.

And after a swim, rinse your dog with fresh water to remove chlorine, salt or bacteria, which can irritate their skin or cause infections. Also, do not let your dog swim in lakes, streams or ponds that have algae growing on the surface. Although some algae are nontoxic, exposure to certain types of **blue-green algae** can cause life-threatening or fatal illness in pets.

With the proper precautions taken, you and your dog can enjoy many swimming sessions together, but keep in mind that some dogs may never take to the water — and that's OK too.

## Sources and References

<sup>1,2,3</sup> [Whole Dog Journal March 11, 2024](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Whole Dog Journal March 21, 2019](#)

<sup>5</sup> [The Anatomical Record April 3, 2020](#)

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