

# Are You Overlooking the Health Struggles of Flat-Faced Dogs?

They may seem cute and 'comedically expressive,' yet these breeds are in fact struggling with a variety of health issues, such as breathing problems. One vet describes it as 'breathing through a straw your entire life.'

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- French bulldogs are now the no. 1 most popular dog breed in America, but their flat-faced appearance comes with severe health issues, including breathing difficulties and a shorter lifespan
- Brachycephalic dogs suffer from Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome (BOAS), making breathing extremely difficult and impacting their ability to enjoy normal activities like sleeping, running and playing
- Flat-faced breeds are prone to various health problems including skin infections, eye issues, birthing difficulties and mobility problems due to their unique physical characteristics
- A 2023 study found that people who prefer brachycephalic breeds are aware of health issues but tend to normalize them, often misinterpreting signs of distress as cute behavior
- Owners of flat-faced dogs must be prepared for special care requirements, potential surgeries, and higher veterinary costs. Many unprepared owners end up surrendering their pets to shelters or rescues

In 2022, the French bulldog took the no. 1 spot in the "American Kennel Club's Most Popular Dog Breeds" list, dethroning the Labrador Retriever, which held the spot for 31 years.<sup>1</sup> Described to be "cute, appealing and almost comedically expressive," French bulldogs, as well as other flat-faced dogs, are becoming trendy nowadays.

But did you know that these dog breeds are actually dealing with severe health issues? Their adorable appearance comes at the cost of their health and is the reason they live shorter lives compared to other dog breeds.

## 'Like Breathing Through a Straw' — Flat-Faced Dogs Are Struggling to Breathe All the Time

Several breeds are classified as brachycephalic (flat-faced) dogs — French and English bulldogs, Boston Terriers and pugs are a few examples. These dogs have been bred to have shortened noses and skulls, bulging eyes, and excess skin and soft tissue, even inside their mouths.

*"Tissues from the mouth, windpipe and lungs are squashed into a smaller, enclosed space, so dogs struggle to breath sufficient air and oxygen and their airways are narrow and twisted abnormally," the Humane Society of the United States explains.*

Unfortunately, this unique facial structure comes with a high risk of health conditions. One of the most common and noticeable ones is difficulty breathing. If you have a brachycephalic pet, listen closely to their breathing — do you notice how loud and labored their breathing is? Can you hear the snorting and wheezing sounds with each breath they take?

This isn't normal — it's a condition called brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome (BOAS), and refers to a set of abnormalities that affect the upper airway of dogs. It's a result of selective breeding of these dogs.

BOAS is also called congenital obstructive upper airway disease and, as described by veterinarian Sean Wensley, is akin to breathing through a straw — only, these animals are stuck with it for their entire lives.<sup>2</sup> According to VCA Animal Hospitals:<sup>3</sup>

*“Brachycephalic airway syndrome has been linked to changes in the lungs, as well as in the gastrointestinal tract, including bronchial collapse, gastroesophageal reflux, and chronic gastritis. In bronchial collapse, the bronchi (the airways that connect the trachea to deeper airways of the lungs) weaken and collapse, causing further obstruction. Gastroesophageal reflux occurs when intestinal fluids flow back into the esophagus (the tube that connects the throat to the stomach).”*

Sadly, dogs with BOAS usually find it difficult to enjoy even the simplest things that most dogs love to do, such as sleeping, running, eating and playing. In extreme cases, brachycephalic dogs will have continuous difficulty breathing — it's not unusual for them to collapse from lack of oxygen. And if left untreated, symptoms can worsen over time.

## Other Health Problems Plaguing Brachycephalic Dogs

Aside from breathing difficulties, flat-faced dogs breeds are prone to skin allergies. They usually experience health issues, like conjunctivitis, cherry eye, dry eye and corneal ulcers.<sup>4</sup> The Humane Society lists some of the common conditions that plague these dogs, such as:<sup>5</sup>

- **Skin infections** — The excessive folds and wrinkles in their skin can become infected if not regularly cleaned.
- **Exercise and heat intolerance, vomiting and difficulty eating** — These problems can arise due to the dogs' smushed face and narrowed air passages.
- **Birthing difficulties** — Flat-faced dogs are born with disproportionately large heads — this can pose complications when giving birth. In fact, majority of brachycephalic breeds are born through caesarian section.

Due to the frequent interbreeding of brachycephalic breeds, many of them also have short, stocky bodies, putting them at risk of mobility issues, back and joint problems, and digestive problems.

## Many Pet Parents Are Either Unaware of These Health Struggles or Tend to 'Normalize' Them

A 2023 study published in the journal Applied Animal Behaviour Science<sup>6</sup> looked at the “brachycephalic paradox” — the phenomenon of how these dog breeds have become so widely popular today despite of their many health issues.

The authors examined various factors that influence people's preferences for these dog breeds. What they found was surprising — apparently, those who prefer these dog breeds are already aware of their health issues, but, although they strive to provide the best care for their companion animals, they also tend to “normalize” these health problems. Eniko Kubinyi, one of the study authors, explains:<sup>7</sup>

*“[I]t 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.”*

## Be Well-Educated About the Problems Concerning Flat-Faced Dogs

Because of brachycephalic dog breeds' many health problems, they usually require special care and extra attention, as compared to other dog breeds. Here are some reminders to keep in mind:<sup>8</sup>

- Flat-faced breeds will need their skin folds and wrinkles to be cleaned regularly to avoid infections.
- Keep them out of hot, humid environments to prevent overheating and support normal respiration.
- Make sure they're at a healthy weight — overweight or obese dogs are more prone to respiratory difficulties than healthy-weight pets.
- Keep their life as stress-free as possible — stress can exacerbate their breathing problems.

In most cases, dogs with BOAS would require surgery to remove obstructions in their airway. So, if you already own one or are looking to adopt one, make sure you are prepared for this, as well as all potential issues that you may face along the road. Sadly, many pet parents who rush to adopt or buy one of these dogs usually become overwhelmed with the growing stack of vet bills, and end up surrendering their pet to animal shelters or pet rescues.

One such rescue is the Freedom Frenchie Rescue (FFR), a nonprofit rescue in Arizona. Founded by Mo Slusher, who manages the foundation along with her two sons, FFR cares for as many as a dozen French and English bulldogs at a time, including providing for their medical needs. Slusher says the increase in demand for brachycephalic dogs has led to backyard breeding, further worsening the plight of these pets.<sup>9</sup> "They didn't choose this life. They didn't ask for any of this," Slusher said.

### Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [American Kennel Club, Most Popular Dog Breeds](#)

<sup>2,5,8</sup> [The Humane Society of the United States, Flat face dog breeds and health issues](#)

<sup>3</sup> [VCA Animal Hospitals, Brachycephalic Airway Syndrome in Dogs](#)

<sup>4,9</sup> [WKYC, September 4, 2024](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Volume 264, July 2023, 105948](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Phys Org, June 6, 2023](#)

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