

Families Are Relinquishing These Dogs in Record Numbers – But Why?

It seems like the demand knows no bounds. They've grown hugely popular. Yet this sad mistake sets the stage for relinquishment and euthanasia. And what can you do if you already have one but are overwhelmed by empty promises you once believed?

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Veterinarians in the U.K. are now recommending that people stop acquiring flat-faced dogs, in particular, Pugs, French Bulldogs and English Bulldogs
- The British Veterinary Association (BVA) hopes to discourage continued selective breeding of brachycephalic dogs for physical features that destroy their health
- The pain and suffering these dogs endure is man-made and entirely preventable
- As the popularity of flat-faced dogs in the U.K. grows, so does the number of dogs abandoned at shelters because owners can't cope with the health problems inherent in these poorly bred animals
- The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) is also concerned about health problems in brachy breeds, as well as several other dogs are also suffering from selective breeding for a certain look rather than good health

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British veterinarians have been urging people to stop buying flat-faced dogs, specifically Pugs, French Bulldogs and English Bulldogs. In recent years, these three breeds have grown hugely popular in the U.K.

The British Veterinary Association (BVA) warns that flat-faced (brachycephalic) dogs often deal with multiple debilitating health problems, and "breeding them just encourages more pain and suffering."¹

"What that means for vets working in clinics," says Sean Wensley, president of the BVA, "is that we are having to treat many of the health consequences of these breeds which have flattened faces, particularly some of the breathing difficulties.

We would liken it to us as humans having to spend our entire life breathing through a drinking straw."²

The breathing through a straw comparison is what many U.S. veterinarians also use to describe for owners how difficult it can be for dogs with brachycephalic respiratory syndrome to breathe.

Brachycephalic Respiratory Syndrome

"Brachy" is a Greek word meaning short, and "cephalic" means head. Brachys are short-headed, short-muzzled breeds. Other examples of brachy dogs include the Boston Terrier, Boxer, Shih Tzu and Pekingese. Himalayans and Persians are examples of brachycephalic cat breeds.

Due to their altered facial construction, flat-faced breeds have what is called brachycephalic respiratory syndrome to varying degrees. These pets often have very small, tightly scrolled nostrils that are so narrow it can be hard to move air in and out.

They also have an elongated soft palate, which is a flap of skin at the back of the throat that causes the characteristic snorting and other respiratory sounds often heard in brachy breeds. Often the windpipe in these animals is very narrow in places, which leads to a condition called tracheal stenosis.

This problem can predispose the pet to tracheal collapse, as well as problems with anesthesia. And due to all their upper airway challenges, brachycephalic dogs often don't pant efficiently, which makes them prime candidates for heat stroke.

Brachycephalic respiratory syndrome can be a progressive condition, so these dogs can develop problems with the trachea or larynx over time. It's important to get such issues addressed as soon as they appear rather than waiting until a pet develops significant respiratory distress.

The Suffering These Dogs Endure Is Man-Made

As Wensley makes clear, the health problems these dogs are suffering are man-made.

"We are deliberately breeding dogs for physical characteristics that we as humans find appealing, like a flat-face," he says.

"But importantly, that means they are preventable problems because if we could breed for healthier shapes instead, then we are going to have, in turn, healthy, happy dogs that enjoy a good quality of life, which we feel strongly ought to be the case."

Wensley believes U.K. veterinarians have a duty not only to treat the dogs dealing with breed-related health problems, but also to raise awareness with the public that as a society, we are creating entirely preventable suffering in these animals.

"We would actually strongly dissuade and discourage prospective dog owners from taking on this breed to help improve animal welfare," says Wensley, "and I suppose also importantly to avoid some of the veterinary costs that go with treating these conditions."

Growing Number of Flat-Faced Dogs Are Being Dropped Off at Shelters

Sadly, while the purchase of flat-faced dogs in the U.K. is trending upward, dog parents are also reportedly **abandoning their brachys** in "alarming numbers," according to a headline in the Telegraph.³ The reason? Owners can't cope with the health problems associated with these breeds.

At the Battersea Dogs & Cats Home in south London, the number of Pugs entering the shelter almost tripled in just five years, and the number of abandoned Shih Tzus has also increased significantly.

This has prompted the shelter to issue a warning that "poor breeding practices are compounding problems associated with the breeds' trademark squashed, short nosed faces, a feature popular with owners."

The veterinarians working with Battersea regularly perform surgery on the dogs to assist their breathing. The image below on the left is from a 1915 book titled "Dogs of All Nations." The picture on the right is today's poorly bred version of the Pug on the left.



Science and Dogs

You can see that the modern day Pug has been bred to exaggerate his brachycephalic characteristics.

The result is a dog that often suffers from high blood pressure, heart problems, low blood oxygen levels, breathing problems, a tendency to overheat and develop heatstroke, dental issues and skin fold dermatitis.

This Pug also has a "highly desirable" double-curl tail, which is actually a genetic defect that can result in paralysis.

Helping Your Brachy Breathe Better

If you are the parent of a brachycephalic dog, it's important to understand that breathing difficulties can prevent your furry companion from enjoying 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.

It's important to know the difference between normal and abnormal breathing sounds in your pet, and to make an appointment with a veterinarian if you 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 as the owner of a brachy include keeping your dog or cat fit and trim. Overweight and obese animals have much more serious respiratory difficulties than those 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 animal companion's life as stress-free as possible is also recommended to support your pet's health and quality of life.

Canadian Veterinarians Are Also Concerned About Certain Breeds

According to CBC Radio, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) hasn't issued a recommendation against acquiring flat-faced dogs, but the organization does oppose selective breeding for physical characteristics that can cause health problems in pets. Breeds the CVMA has identified as being of concern include:

- Doberman Pinschers and Boxers for heart disease
- Dachshunds, Corgis and Bassett Hounds for back problems
- German Shepherds for their uneven gait
- Bulldogs for their wide heads

US Veterinarians Weigh in as Well

Very recently, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) approved a new policy on the responsible breeding of companion animals. From the AVMA news release:⁴

"Inherited Disorders in Responsible Breeding of Companion Animals

To maximize the health and welfare of companion animals, the AVMA supports research in genetic and inherited disorders to better educate the profession and breeders on identifying and minimizing inherited disorders in companion animal breeding programs.

To assist with this, the AVMA encourages veterinarians to pursue continuing education in the emerging area of genetic disease in companion animals. The AVMA also encourages veterinarians to educate breeders, companion animal owners and the public on the responsibilities involved with breeding and selecting companion animals."

The intent of the new policy, which addresses responsible breeding for all companion animals, not simply dogs and cats, is to support responsible breeding practices that reduce or eliminate the health and welfare concerns associated with inherited conditions, not to condemn or stigmatize specific breeds.

Sources and References

^{1, 2} [CBC Radio, September 21, 2016](#)

³ [The Telegraph, November 14, 2015](#)

⁴ [AVMA@Work, January 14, 2017 \(Archived\)](#)
