



Getting to Know
Labradors

A Guide to Choosing and Owning a Labrador

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Animalinfo
Publications

Table of Contents

About the Author	5	Lead Training	
Acknowledgements	6	Keeping Your Puppy Safe	
Photo Acknowledgements	7	Introducing an Adult Dog to Your Home	82
Introduction	8	Meeting Other Family Members	
History of the Labrador Retriever	9	Establishing a Routine	
Description of the Breed	12	Adopting an Older Dog	
Physical Appearance		Diets	88
Coat		Fresh Foods	
Size		Commercial Diets	
Regional Differences		Special Needs	
Type Differences		Keeping Your Labrador Healthy	98
Life Expectancy		Visual Examination	
Temperament / Personality		Vaccinations	
Compatibility with other Pets and Children		Endoparasites & Ectoparasites	
Breed Standards	22	Teeth and Nails	
Kennel Club Recognition		Grooming	
Breed Clubs		Obesity	
The Ideal Labrador Owner	27	Protection from Heat	
Assessing Your Own Situation		Anal Glands	
One Dog or Two		Sterilisation	
Living with a Labrador		Exercise	
Training Requirements		Common Canine Health Issues	131
Play		Arthritis	
Understanding your Labrador's Wolf Ancestry		Cancer	
Popular Crosses of the Labrador Retriever ...	40	Cataracts	
Where to Find Your Labrador Retriever	44	Diabetes	
Buying a Labrador from a Pet Shop		Heart Disease	
Pre-owned and Rescued Labradors		Labrador Health Issues	143
Buying a Labrador from a Registered Breeder		Genetic Disease	
Selecting a Healthy Labrador Puppy	51	Higher Incidence Disorders	
What should you expect from a Supplier?		Lower Incidence Disorders	
Veterinary Certification		Your Responsibilities as a Dog Owner	161
Available Health Screening		Basic Training and Obedience	
Visual Examination		Being a Good Neighbour	
Bringing Your Puppy Home	65	Respecting Wildlife	
Preparing For Your New Puppy		Irresponsible Practices	
The First Days		Old Age and Your Dog	
Diets and Feeding Regime		Resources	171
Toilet Training		General Resources (including National	
		Kennel Councils and links to Breed	
		Standards)	
		Health Resources (including Disease Testing	
		& Information Organisations)	

History of the Labrador Retriever



The earliest known ancestor of the Labrador can be traced back to Newfoundland, an island off the east coast of Canada. This island was home to the Dorset Eskimos before English traders settled there in the early 1600's, establishing a flourishing fishing industry. Not long after settlement, history records the appearance of two kinds of dogs – the Newfoundland, and the Lesser Newfoundland, also called the St. John's dog. Prior to this there was no evidence of dogs living on the island, so it is presumed that the early settlers brought both breeds with them, probably from somewhere in Europe. There was plenty of game on the island, so it is highly likely that the settlers would have brought hunting dogs with them to supplement their diet of fish.



1856 St John's Dog – 'Nell' was owned by the Earl of Home (1799-1881)

Top – 'Blackboy Trump Card' (Trump)

The fishing industry became very strong, and many ships from England and Europe fished the waters around Newfoundland and Labrador (nearby mainland Canada). The lesser Newfoundlands were found to be far more versatile than their larger, shaggier counterparts. Their shorter coats seemed to repel water, and didn't become weighed down with ice when they became wet in freezing conditions. Their smaller size also meant they were easier for fishermen to carry on their boats, where they became integral members of the fishing team. They were trained to dive into the icy water and grab the ends of the fish-laden nets and swim with them to shore where the catch could be emptied. Not only were these powerfully built dogs exceptionally strong swimmers, but

Type differences

There are also some differences of type within countries. This basically sees the breed split into two types - the working, hunting or field-trial Labrador, as opposed to the show or bench Lab which competes in the show ring. The working Lab is similar to the American type and the show Lab is similar to the English type. The Americans however, refine the differences even further:-

New England Water Labrador – Bred short, compact and light boned to suit water-bird hunters, who wanted a smaller retriever that would be easier to carry on their boats.

Show Labrador – Mid-sized Lab, typical of the American standard for the breed.

Field Labrador – Bred for speed and endurance and so taller and lankier. They have also been selected for high energy levels, and have a tendency to be more headstrong, so need an experienced owner.



Blackboy Show and Field Labradors demonstrate that they still possess the desire to retrieve and a love of water. Photo – Anna Courtman

Some breeders are concerned that the division between 'field' and 'show' Labradors may become so great that they will eventually become separate breeds. There is currently a fairly heated debate regarding the pros and cons of this, and some breeders are trying to reverse the separation trend by breeding 'field' and 'show' Labradors together.

When looking for a puppy from a breeder, be aware of the different types available. Some breeders are very specific with the type they select for, so talk to them about your needs and whether a dog from them would suit you. Many other breeders however, are more general in their selections, and breed from a mix of different bloodlines, producing 'shows', 'fields' and mixtures in between.

Breed Standards



If you are interested in showing Labradors you will need to purchase an animal with a National Kennel Club or Council registered pedigree. You will also need to join the Kennel Council in your state or region as an exhibitor. These clubs cater for all

purebred dogs that they recognise as being well established, known breeds. Their broad objectives are to improve the lives of dogs and promote responsible dog ownership. They do this in many ways including providing advice on dog welfare, choosing the right breed, health, training, show and sporting activities and breeding. They also often maintain health databases for inherited diseases, and can guide owners towards agencies that test for these disorders. They may become involved in legislation relating to dogs, and be a national spokesperson on their behalf. The other major role they fill is to maintain a register of canine pedigrees. This is important in the promotion of the health of dogs, so inbreeding and the breeding of dogs with inherited disorders can be avoided.



'Australian Champion Blackboy Royal Rajah' wins Best in Show at the 2005 Labrador Retriever Club of Western Australia Championship Show

Image Top – 'Australian Champion Rewari Stop Press News' (Imp UK). Photos – Anna Courtman

to spend some time out of the house with your dog.

Dogs need training! What's it like owning a puppy? It's a bit like getting a newborn child that can run a lot faster than you! You need to get this bundle of mischief under control as soon as possible. It doesn't need to take a lot of time if you aren't interested in competitive obedience training, but it does require some effort to make your dog aware of the boundaries and to learn acceptable behaviour. Puppies need to play and chew and this is just an unavoidable fact of life. They see no difference between their toys and your best shoes and clothes, unless someone teaches them. Rather than walking at a reasonable pace, they believe that there is some sort of magical reward for getting to wherever they are going at ninety miles an hour, dragging their owner along behind them. There are many organisations that teach obedience as well as books and videos to help you, but only you can decide if you have the time and inclination to fulfil this requirement of owning a dog. Below are some titles and links that may help you with this aspect of owning a dog.



Training Titles

Animalinfo Guide to Basic Obedience Training

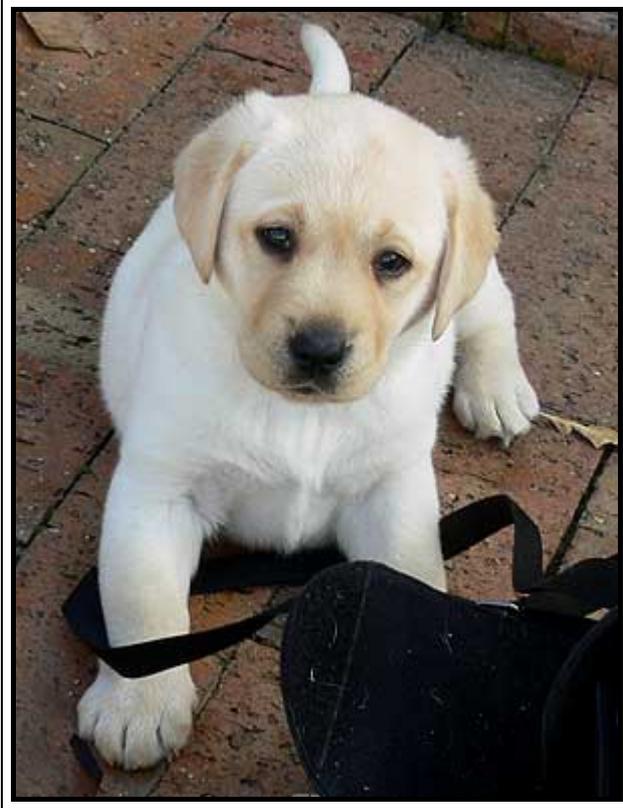
By the time they are a few months old puppies are ready for mischief. It is important to get them under control as soon as possible.

One Dog or Two

For a number of reasons, many people opt to share their lives with two dogs. This can be beneficial for the dog, particularly in households where there is no one at home during the day, but it should not be considered a solution to not having enough time to spend with your dog. Two dogs still need walks, play time, and other forms of human interaction. If you have insufficient time for one dog, you probably have even less for two. Two dogs however, can play vigorously together, allowing you to relax at the end of a long day at work and watch while the dogs participate in the more physical aspects of play.

regarding all of the diseases I have listed in the following section 'Available Health Screening'.

Available Health Screening



When purchasing a pup, be sure to ask for documented proof that the parents have been screened for health problems.

It is important to note that genetic diseases are not specific to purebred dogs. All dogs are susceptible to genetic disease but the tracking of pedigrees, genetic testing and controlled breeding practised by good breeders provides an opportunity to reduce the incidence of these diseases in future generations.

Many genetic disorders won't be obvious in a young puppy, and in fact sometimes won't become noticeable until they become adults. Therefore, the best way to get some idea of whether a puppy may inherit a health problem is to look at the disease status of the parents. Responsible breeders will generally only breed from stock that has been certified clear of diseases that they could possibly pass on to their offspring. These test results may also be added to a health database, which in some cases is accessible to the general public. The value of these databases is that they allow

responsible breeders to select stock that will improve the health of the breed, while putting pressure on less responsible breeders by giving prospective puppy purchasers the ability to recognise a breeder with documented good genetic lines. The popular use of databases varies from country to country, and failure to use them by breeders does not necessarily mean that the quality of the breeder and their stock is questionable. There are a number of easily accessible health registries, particularly in America, where, given the pedigree name of the animal, anyone can look up test results and disease status (see the reference section at the back of the book for registries).

Breeders with poor test results are not obliged to make the information available but many do. Those with good results will often be happy to add them to a database as it helps advertise the fact that their dogs are free of genetic diseases. If you find a breeder you may be interested in talking to about obtaining a puppy, and a health database is accessible in your country, why not find out the names of some of their dogs and check on their health status yourself?



The coat of a puppy is usually soft and loose and should be fairly shiny.

mates and their mother at this age. It would be unusual for the pups not to have been weaned onto solid food by then. Some breeders insist that pups should go much earlier in order to bond with their new owners. The reality is that these breeders would like the expense of raising the pups to end sooner rather than later. Pups do get more difficult to sell the older they get, however a breeder can start to advertise the pups for viewing earlier to give themselves more time to find buyers without letting the pups

actually go home with their new owners until they are eight weeks old. If the pups appear to be too small for their age, you should be very wary about whether the seller is being honest about their age. Labrador puppies are well and truly ready for their new home by eight weeks of age. They are very people orientated, and are craving for contact with their human family by the time they are seven or eight weeks old.

In a way puppies are like battery operated toys. They need to recharge often so they sleep frequently. When they first wake up and shake off the sleepiness, they are fully charged and should be bright, active and playful until their batteries run low and they fall asleep again. Avoid pups that are listless and uninterested in their litter mates and things going

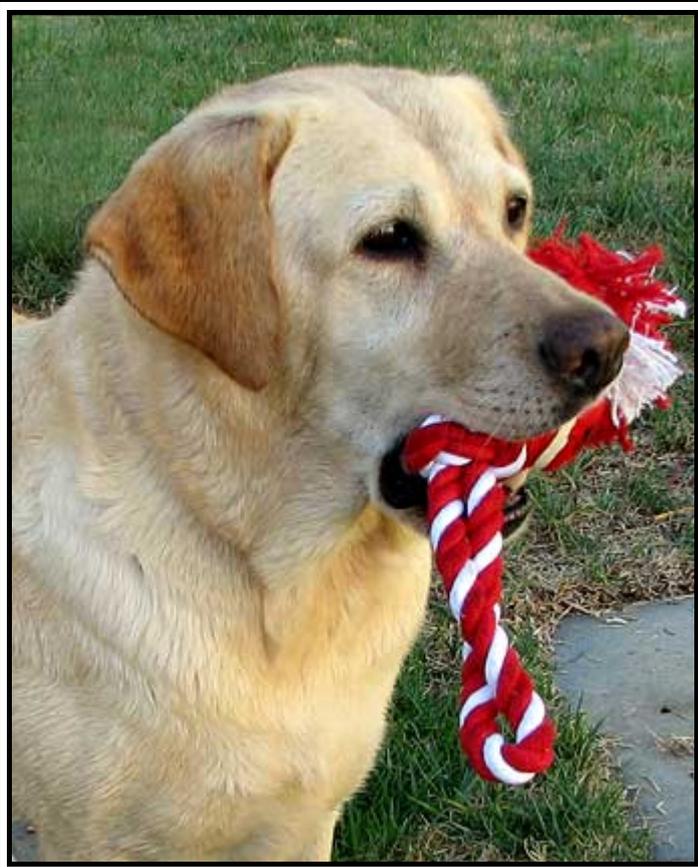


Watching the way pups play and interact with littermates is a good indication of temperament.

Diets



After twelve months of age most Labradors will suffice on one meal a day. However, there are situations where maintaining more frequent feeds may be beneficial. For example, a couple of feeds a day may keep your dog more relaxed and quiet, as a hungry dog may be more inclined to be noisy or destructive. However, over feeding Labradors is also a major problem, so in many cases destructive and noisy behaviour is better prevented by providing activity toys rather than by feeding extra meals.



Choosing an unsuitable diet for an adult dog has less serious consequences than choosing an inadequate diet for a puppy. Because puppies grow so rapidly, feeding a poor diet can have an irreversible negative impact on their development. With adult dogs however, most negative impacts of an unsuitable diet can be reversed, if recognised early enough. It is advisable to always choose a good quality base product. However, to avoid boredom, to cater for fussy eaters, and dogs that may have food allergies, more variety and dietary options can be offered without too much

Providing activity toys may be a better solution to noisy behaviour than feeding extra meals.

risk. Labs have terrific appetites, and it is unlikely you will have any trouble with fussiness.

Commercial Diets

The principles of feeding commercial diets are basically the same for adults as those covered in the puppy section earlier in this book. There are high and medium quality commercial diets but also many others that are made with lower quality ingredients. The high quality diets usually have better digestibility and therefore better nutrient absorption and less waste production. This translates into better dog health and less droppings to clean up. There are also moist and semi-moist diets available for adults and these have higher water content than commercial dry foods.



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Identifying a good quality product may not be easy. Price is not always the best guide but your vet or a reputable breeder may help you decide on a good product. To complicate the issue, a premium product that comes highly recommended by vets and breeders, may be considered inedible by your dog. If your dog won't eat the product, or it has an adverse reaction to one of the

ingredients, it is obviously not the diet for you. Moist diets are often more palatable so the combination of a top quality dry food and a lower quality moist diet stirred together may help to get your dog to accept the diet provided. Cooked and raw meats can also be added but you should be aware that many vets warn against the use of raw meat, due to the potential for bacterial and parasitic infections.

The main nutritional needs that your diet needs to meet are as follows:

Protein

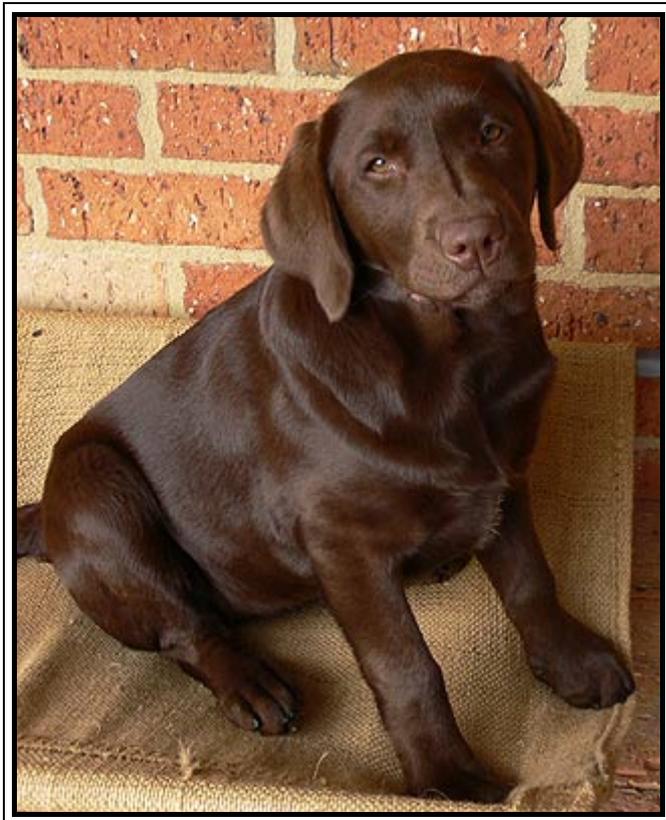
Being primarily carnivorous animals, protein in the form of quality meats or meat meals is the most important component of your dog's diet. Protein is expensive and your better quality products can be identified by the type of protein listed. Products that include specified fresh meat such as chicken or beef, and meat meals that are named, such as 'chicken meal' or 'beef meal', are generally better quality products. Meat meals are not considered an inferior source of protein. They are produced from cuts of meat that are not for human consumption but do not include hair, feathers, hoofs, and heads. They include the correct ratio of calcium/phosphorous and have

Keeping Your Labrador Healthy



Visual Examination

Ownership of any animal includes being responsible for maintaining their health and wellbeing. Unlike children, they are unable to tell you when they are feeling unwell or when they are experiencing pain. It is up to you, the owner, to recognise signs and symptoms that may indicate a problem. One of the most important ways of doing this

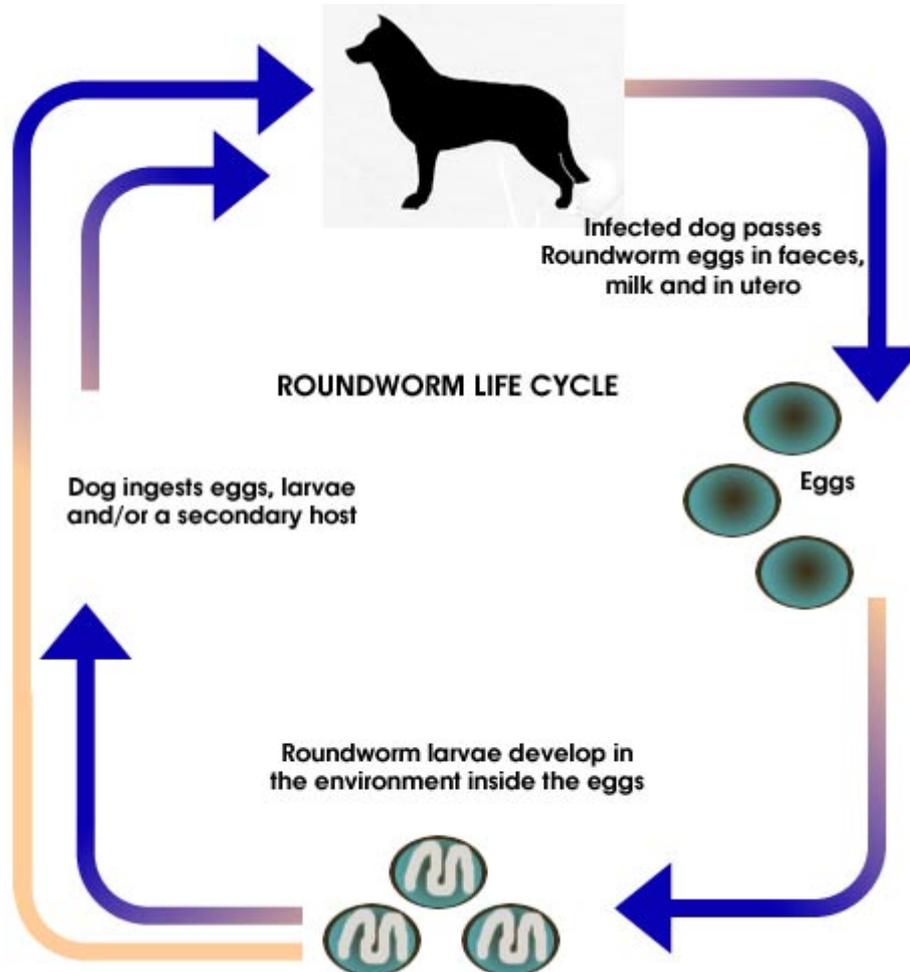


A dog's coat is one of the best overall indicators of good health.

is through the use of simple observation skills. Being aware of what is 'normal' for your dog will help you identify any condition that is not.

If you have recently acquired your dog or puppy and you are unsure of its health status, it is best to take it to the vet for a check-up. Your vet can usually identify any general health issues that may be a problem and can also give you a few pointers on recognising poor health, such as coat and skin condition, body weight, teeth, and nails. Your dog will be weighed each time it visits the same vet so that they have a record of the dog's weight. If your dog receives a clean bill of health from the vet you will have something to identify as 'normal' for your dog. After that it is up to you to identify any variations that may indicate a problem.

diarrhoea is common. Dogs may also vomit and large worms may be seen at this stage. Diagnosis is by symptoms and/or faecal testing. Due to the high infestation rate in puppies, most vets recommend a regular worming program for young dogs, without performing faecal checks. If your dog is not on a preventative program it is advisable to get a faecal check when you take your dog for its yearly veterinary check.



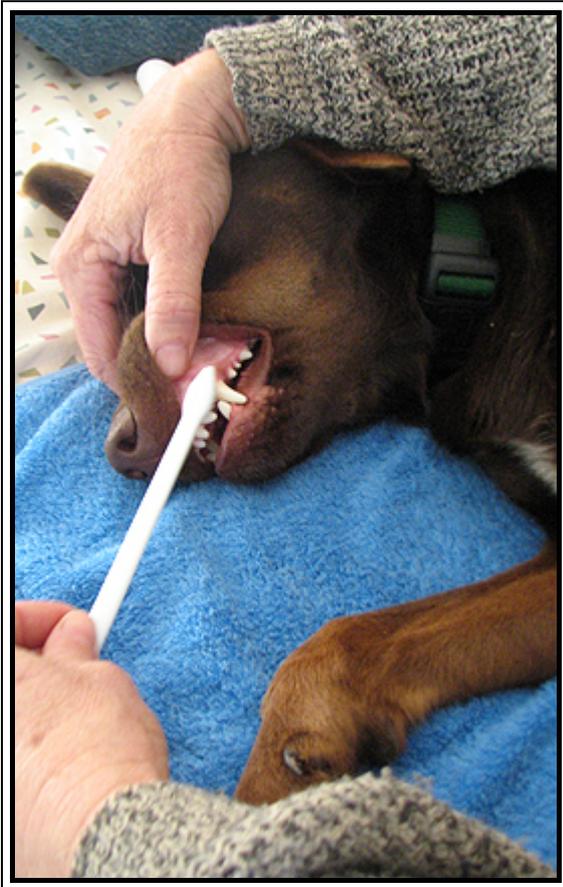
The second species of roundworm, *Toxascaris leonina*, has a simpler lifecycle. It completes its cycle in the intestine and does not migrate within the body. The same wormers are effective against both species. Many of the combination worming treatments are effective against roundworms. Monthly flea or heartworm prevention programs that include roundworm treatments are also effective in preventing environmental contamination. Due to the fact that roundworms can only be treated when they are present in the intestine, multiple treatments may be required to rid the dog's system of roundworms. The monthly preventative programs are effective in accomplishing this task.

Hookworms (*Ancylostoma caninum*, *Ancylostoma braziliense*)

Heavy burdens of most intestinal worms can cause serious illness in your dog and hookworm, in particular, can cause death in young pups due to blood loss. Unlike other intestinal worms that absorb nutrients from food passing through the digestive system, hookworms suck blood directly from their host. Like roundworms they have

the gums, foul smelling breath and brown tartar deposits. Remember that a dog with a painful mouth is less likely to eat well but is more likely to bite as a result of the pain it is experiencing. Serious dental work will require a general anaesthetic and can be very costly. An early preventative dental care program is far more cost effective and can avoid unnecessary suffering in your dog. For more tips on training your dog to accept regular dental inspection and tooth brushing refer to the *Animalinfo 'Guide to Training for Good Health'*.

Appropriate dental chews can help keep a dog's teeth in good condition.



With behavioural conditioning your dog can learn to accept regular brushing.

Finger brushes supplied in dog toothbrush kits may be easier to use than the standard brush.



Labrador Health Issues



Just as humans suffer from a seemingly infinite number of health problems, so too do dogs. However, instead of rewriting the veterinary journals here, I have included a list of those health problems which are most specific to Labradors, and which are most important for you, as an owner or potential buyer to know about. Some of the problems can be very serious but you should remember that they are 'potential' problems only, and that the risk of your dog developing them can be reduced dramatically by being careful where you obtain your dog from, and by also providing the right diet and exercise.

Many health issues are genetic and can be selectively bred out by reputable breeders. Many breeders will also offer a warranty of some kind against one of their



Purchasing a healthy puppy from a reputable breeder can help ensure that you will have a long and happy relationship with your dog.

puppies developing some of these disorders. However, although the warranty may offer you some sort of compensation, such as a refund of purchase price, it won't change the fact that the puppy will have become a loved member of your family, and may now have to cope with an uncomfortable and possibly shortened life. Research and health screenings are therefore an important part in the process of purchasing a puppy, so you can ensure to the best of your ability, that your dog will have a happy and healthy life with you.

Inheritance via a Dominant Gene

This means that only one copy of the abnormal gene needs to be present in an offspring for them to exhibit the disease. It's a lot easier to eliminate these diseases, as they can't be hidden in carriers, although there are still challenges, as some aren't expressed until later in life, when dogs may be well into or past their best breeding years.

Higher Incidence Disorders

As mentioned in a previous chapter, Labradors can be prone to **Hip and Elbow Dysplasia** as well as the eye diseases **Retinal Dysplasia** and **Progressive Retinal Atrophy (PRA)**. The following descriptions look at them in some detail.

Elbow Dysplasia

What is Elbow Dysplasia?

Elbow Dysplasia is an inherited disease of the elbow, causing abnormal development of the joint. It is most commonly found in large breed dogs and seems to affect males more frequently than females. It is typically a disease of young dogs, but can affect dogs at any age.

There are different types of elbow dysplasia but they are all closely related in that they cause the same disease process – osteoarthritic changes in the elbow joint. As mentioned above it is an inherited defect but can be worsened by other environmental factors such as

- Diet - excessive weight gain or abnormally fast development in large breed puppies which can put more strain on the bones and joints.
- Excessive activity
- Trauma



Elbow dysplasia in a dog.

*Yellow arrow - Step between radius and ulna
Red arrow - Missing cranial border of coronoid process (fragmented coronoid process, FCP)
White arrow - Osteoarthrosis of the ulnar bone
Photo – Uwe Gille*

The types of elbow dysplasia are:-

1. OCD (Osteochondritis Dissecans) of the medial humeral condyle – this is where cartilage problems develop on the elbow end of the humerus (the long bone in the front leg above the elbow)

Entropion

A disorder whereby the edges of the eyelid (usually the lower lid), roll inwards, bringing the eyelashes into contact with the surface of the eye. This continual rubbing of lashes on the cornea can be painful for your dog, and also result in permanent damage and vision impairment if not treated. It may be important to note that if your dog has had surgery to correct entropion, then it will be disqualified in the show ring.

If required, more detailed information on low incidence disorders can be found at - www.animalinfo.com.au



'Blackboy Licence T Thrill' (Fizz)

The incidence of eye disease in Labradors can be greatly reduced through supporting breeders that participate in regular eye testing of their breeding stock.