

The “Teacup” Trend— Does it Really Fit Your Lifestyle & WALLET?

By b j Altschul

Ever since Paris Hilton and her “teacup” Chihuahua, Tinkerbell, made headlines about just how small a dog can be, there’s been a rush to acquire tiny pups to tote around in chic designer handbags made by Chloe, Michael Kors, or Gucci for the “awwwww!” factor.

But miniscule dogs are not inanimate fashion accessories! They are fragile, living animals—companions that owners must train and tend to on a regular basis for feeding, grooming, veterinary care, attention, and exercise, not to mention the commitment for the rest of their lifetime. Families with young children or couples expecting babies should opt instead for medium or large dogs as youngsters often don’t have the coordination required to pick up, carry, or play with tiny dogs with a delicate internal structure. “Don’t give a china teacup to a child. It’s the same with a dog. They’re fragile,” says Barbara Fine, who volunteers with United Maltese Rescue.

Jen Quigley, who volunteers with Yorkie Rescue Me, says that Yorkies, too, commonly don’t like children. And they’re often harder to housetrain than big dogs. “They’re terriers. They’re stubborn as hell and have a mind of their own. They have small bladders and it’s hard to expect them to hold it in for an extended period of time while you’re at work 8 to 10 hours a day. This is the number one reason dogs are returned to rescue.”

If you are looking for a pup that isn’t even the minimum weight to meet breed standard, the odds increase dramatically that you’re going to have a slew of extra veterinary responsibilities and expenses, on top of the higher cost of acquiring the tiny pup in the first place. In addition, a tiny dog might not be a good fit for your family, future, and financial situation.

Just What is a “Teacup” Dog, Anyway?

According to the AKC and official breed associations, there’s no such thing as a “teacup” or “pocket dog.” The AKC simply does not recognize these nicknames as standard sizes for any breed of dog. Look up the 21 breeds that make up the Toy group on the AKC website, www.akc.org. By definition these are small dogs to begin



with, many of them considerably less than 10 pounds. Yorkshire terriers, for example, are usually 3 to 7 pounds, and Maltese are preferred at 4 to 6 pounds. If a tiny dog fits in your budget and lifestyle, suggests Fine, look for a dog that’s on the small side of its breed standard.

Breeders and pet stores use terms like “teacup” or “pocket” as a marketing ploy to appeal to a prospective buyer’s heartstrings – and purse strings, as they typically charge exorbitant prices for a dog that is almost certain to experience costly health problems.

Reputable breeders point out that dogs are not intended to be smaller than 3 or 4 pounds at maturity for optimum health. That’s more than small enough for most dog parents! If you want a pet smaller than that, argue several rescue volunteers, get something that’s supposed to be diminutive, a true pocket pet like a hamster or guinea pig.

Health Issues with Tiny Dogs

Puppy mills and even USDA licensed breeders do not necessarily adhere to breed standards, strict health regulations, and efforts to eliminate predisposition to certain genetic diseases or flaws.

Allowing the smallest dogs of a litter to mate often leads to puppies who have bodies too small for their organs. When you bring a pup home that’s just eight weeks old, you have to feed it every two hours and handle its body so gently to avoid damaging its bones. A scary proposition!

There’s a list of associated diseases for each small breed, says Dr. Jarod Williams, a board certified internal medicine specialist with VCA Veterinary Referral Associates in Gaithersburg. Among these are an abnormal liver shunt that compromises the liver function due



3 lb. 'Tilly'. She died 2 weeks ago at age 10 of congestive heart failure

to toxins in the blood stream, a collapsing trachea that makes the dog cough with a sound like a honking goose, and orthopedic problems such as luxating patella, where the groove for a joint isn't formed as well as it should be.

"Good breeders are the breed's best friend," says Dr. Williams. "They look out for these diseases and eliminate them in their dogs through selective breeding. They have a love for that breed."

If you're looking to buy or adopt a specific breed of dog, he advises, find out as much as you can in advance so you'll have an idea what kinds of questions to ask. In particular, ask about the animal's parentage and lineage so you can identify any potential problems.

"A red flag is a breeder who won't give you information about parentage," Dr. Williams emphasizes. If you buy from a retailer, you probably won't know the familial history, a sign the dog could be a product of a puppy mill. It's best not to contribute to demand for animals from puppy mills, he says.

While a healthy Toy dog usually has a life expectancy of 15-16 years, those that are smaller than breed standard may not make it past age 5 or 6, says Fine. Most of the dogs that are sick tend to be on the smaller side.

Other potential health problems include epilepsy, bladder surgery, and dental issues, all very expensive health concerns. Bladder surgery, for example, can cost \$1,500, says Quigley. Correcting a Yorkie's liver shunt problem could cost from \$3,000 to \$5,000. A prospective "forever" family that's not willing or able to undertake that level of care should realize limits of what they can afford and let that guide their decision about whether and what kind of dog to consider.

The Real Trend

If what you're looking for is a fashion accessory, "get a Michael Kors handbag," says Fine and leave the dog for someone who is better able to care for an animal. "It'll cost you a lot less."

Resources

Barbara Fine, United Maltese Rescue
www.rescueamaltese.com
<http://www.americanmaltese.org>

Jen Quigley, Yorkie Rescue Me
www.YorkieRescueMe.org

National Breeder's Directory www.infodog.com/brag/breedbystate

AKC shows listed at www.infodog.com/showinfo/showmain.htm

VCA Veterinary Referral Associates www.vcavra.com



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