

Worrying numbers of 'short-nosed' dog owners do not believe their pets to have breathing problems

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Owners of certain popular “short-nosed” dog breeds, including Pugs, Bulldogs, Pekingese and French Bulldogs, are unknowingly putting their pets’ welfare at risk and not seeking essential treatment because they consider their pets’ signs of breathing difficulties to be ‘normal’ for that breed – so reveals a new study from the Royal Veterinary College, published on Thursday 10 May 2012 by the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) in their journal *Animal Welfare*. Other affected breeds in the study included the Boston Terrier, Dogue de Bordeaux, Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, and short-nosed crossbreeds.

As a result of intense selection for short muzzles, ‘brachycephalic’ dogs, such as Pugs, have a compressed upper jaw, which results in the soft tissue being crammed within the skull. These dogs are at high risk of developing brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome (BOAS), with clinical signs including noisy and laboured breathing, breathing difficulties even on short walks, overheating, gagging and choking. These difficulties can prevent affected dogs from being able to enjoy the simple pleasures in a dog’s life such as exercise, play, food and sleep. In severe cases dogs can experience almost continuous breathing difficulties and physically collapse due to lack of oxygen. Clinical signs often get worse over time if they are left untreated.

Researchers at the Royal Veterinary College surveyed the owners of 285 dogs referred to the Queen Mother Hospital for Animals over the course

of five months for all clinical services. A total of 31 dogs affected by BOAS were identified, and their owners' surveyed. The researchers found the marked disparity between owners' reports of severe clinical signs and their perceived lack of a 'breathing problem' to be of great concern.

All affected dogs were reported by their owners to 'snore' (some even when awake), compared with less than 2% of unaffected dogs. Over two thirds of affected dogs were also reported to show breathing difficulties during exercise on a daily basis. Yet, 58% of owners of affected dogs stated that their dog did not currently have, or have a history of, breathing problems, despite reporting high frequency and severe clinical signs consistent with BOAS. This suggests that most owners of dogs with BOAS do not recognise the problem, and do not seek veterinary advice to help alleviate welfare issues associated with the condition.

Spontaneous comments were also provided by several owners of affected animals who declared that their pet did not suffer from breathing problems. These included "No to breathing problem – other than being a Bulldog" and "(No,) but he is a Pug!".

Brachycephalic dogs are increasing in popularity, with Kennel Club registrations of the Pug alone increasing from 3,500 to nearly 6,000 per year between 2007 and 2010.

Rowena Packer from the Royal Veterinary College, who carried out the research, said: "Our study clearly shows that owners of brachycephalic dogs often dismiss the signs of this potentially severe breathing disorder as normal and are prepared to tolerate a high degree of respiratory compromise in their pets before seeking help. It may require a particularly acute attack, such as the dog losing consciousness, for owners to perceive a problem."

Dr Charlotte Burn, who led the research, said “Short noses may make dogs look cute and human-like, but the frequent association with breathing difficulties means that owners need to be aware that this appearance can come with a serious cost to the animal.”

“Just because a problem is common, that doesn't make it less of a problem for the individuals who suffer it.”

Miss Packer said “We would urge dog owners not to simply dismiss abnormal breathing sounds and [breathing difficulties](#) as ‘normal’, and instead seek professional help if they notice any signs, as there may be things that can be done in both the short and long term to provide a better a quality of life for affected dogs.”

“Without serious appreciation of the clinical signs of BOAS, affected dogs may be left untreated to suffer for the rest of their lives, may continue to be used in breeding programmes, and efforts to reduce the number of [dogs](#) affected by this condition may be hampered.”

James Kirkwood, Chief Executive and Scientific Director of UFAW, which publishes Animal Welfare, commented “It is likely that many other genetic welfare problems, caused by selectively breeding for particular physical characteristics, are also perceived by pet owners as ‘normal’. This could be a major constraint to working towards eliminating the problems since pet owners, through their pet-buying decisions for example, can pressure changes in breeding practices that would improve the health and welfare of pets. Lack of information has been a problem for pet owners and UFAW has addressed this by developing a web-based information resource that describes genetic conditions and their welfare consequences on a breed by breed basis. It can be seen at [Genetic welfare problems of companion animals](#).

Provided by Royal Veterinary College

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