

Study highlights health consequences of selectively breeding German Shepherd Dogs

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German Shepherd Dogs (GSDs) could be predisposed to health conditions such as arthritis because of the way they have been bred in recent decades, according to a new study published in the open access journal *Canine Genetics and Epidemiology*.

Data from nearly half a million dogs collected across 430 veterinary clinics in the UK, via the VetCompass Programme at the Royal Veterinary College, reveals that GSDs are most likely to die from complications arising from musculoskeletal disorders (13.6% of cases) or the inability to stand (14.9% of cases). A total of 263 specific disorder types were recorded in German Shepherds, the most common of which were inflammation of the ear canal (7.89% of dogs), osteoarthritis (5.54%), diarrhoea (5.24%), overweight and obesity (5.18%), and aggression (4.76%).

Dr Dan O'Neill, lead author from the Royal Veterinary College, said: "German Shepherd Dogs have previously been reported to have the second highest number of health disorders exacerbated by breeding traits, with Great Danes occupying first place. It has been reported that German Shepherds are predisposed to [conditions](#) such as abnormal formation of the hip joint, cancer and degenerative spinal disorders, but the extent to which these conditions are prevalent in the population are unclear. However, by looking at primary care data from veterinary clinics, we are able to get a much better picture of the real priority conditions affecting this breed and this will help inform clinical practice in the future."

The GSD is one of the most popular breeds worldwide with historical working roles that include herding, guarding, police, military and guide-dog work. German Shepherds were originally bred as a medium-sized dog for herding work until their popularity as a guard dog led to them being bred for a larger size and more confident demeanour.

Breeding of GSDs over recent years has focused on cosmetic traits which may be linked to the breed's current predisposition to certain [health conditions](#). The Kennel Club Breed Watch system lists the German Shepherd as 'requiring particular monitoring and additional support'. Points of concern raised by the Breed Watch system include health complications that may arise from excessive angulation of the back knee and leg joints, a nervous temperament and weak hindquarters.

Dr O'Neill said: "Our results highlight the power of primary-care veterinary clinical records to help understand breed health in dogs and to support evidence-based approaches towards improved health and welfare in dogs. Interestingly, we found osteoarthritis to be one of the most common conditions reported, which may be caused, in part, by breeding for cosmetic traits such as lower hindquarters or a sloping back."

The current study presents the largest analysis of demography, mortality and disorder prevalence in GSDs based exclusively on primary-care veterinary clinical records reported to date.

Caroline Kisko, Kennel Club Secretary said: "The Kennel Club welcomes research which provides valuable information about the health of [dogs](#) of any breed. The German Shepherd Dog is one of the seventeen breeds in the first round of the Kennel Club's Breed Health and Conservation Plan project and therefore this new piece of research will form a valuable part of the evidence-base for this breed."

"Research projects such as these will allow evidence-based

recommendations to be made as to how to advance the [health](#) and welfare of the [breed](#)."

More information: Dan G. O'Neill et al, Demography and disorders of German Shepherd Dogs under primary veterinary care in the UK, *Canine Genetics and Epidemiology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1186/s40575-017-0046-4](#)

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