

The health of British bulldogs is nothing to be proud of

August 4 2022, by Nicola Rooney



Credit: Ethan Wilkinson from Pexels

The bulldog is a beloved British icon, according to a new study—one that is in very poor shape.

A recent study by the U.K.'s [Royal Veterinary College](#) (RVC) compared the veterinary records of more than 2,000 English bulldogs to 22,000 dogs of other breeds and found English bulldogs were more than twice as likely as other dogs to have at least one disorder during 2016. They were also more likely than other breeds to suffer from more than half the 43 disorders studied.

Bulldogs suffer from many [health issues](#) because their physical features have been exaggerated by breeding. Especially high levels were seen in skin, eye and [respiratory problems](#) as well as protruding lower jaws. Bulldogs were 38 times more likely to suffer from skin-fold dermatitis, compared with the general dog population.

The life expectancy of British bulldogs is only [7.2 years](#). The average dog is expected to live [12 years](#).

It's more than ten years since the BBC [stopped televising the Crufts dog show](#) after a documentary, [Pedigree Dogs Exposed](#), highlighted welfare issues associated with dog breeding. Breeding dogs for extreme physical features like long backs and flat faces is [damaging to their health](#). And breeding within a small genetic pool has led to high levels of inherited diseases in some breeds.

Many scientific studies have shown the devastating issues caused by pedigree dog breeding.

Given these facts, is it ethical to breed bulldogs? The [U.K. Animal Welfare Act](#) states [pet owners](#) have a duty to provide for the welfare needs of animals in their care. These include the need to be protected from pain, injury and disease.

There is ample evidence that many bulldogs experience pain and disease because of the features they are bred to show. The RVC study

concentrated on [physical health](#), but anatomy also affects an animal's behavior. Many bulldogs cannot mate or give birth without [help from humans](#) and even play and exercise can cause discomfort. This contravenes another of the dog's welfare needs—to be able to behave normally.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

So, in their current form, breeding bulldogs is not ethical. The breed needs to change radically. This can only be achieved if breeders purposefully avoid breeding harmful features, even if that means losing or moderating the breed's distinctive appearance. A modified bulldog, bred for health and well-being, would make a better national mascot. If this can't happen rapidly, there is a strong argument to restrict breeding. The [Netherlands](#) and [Norway](#) have already done so.

The problems are, of course, not restricted to English bulldogs. Other breeds with shortened skull shapes ([brachycephalic](#)) such as pugs and French bulldogs have [difficulty breathing](#). The shorter the muzzle, the greater the problems they have with breathing.

Yet at the same time that studies have proved the risks, these breeds have become [more popular](#) with [no health improvement](#), for the majority of dogs. Either the public is still unaware of the danger to these dogs' health or they believe the cute appeal outweighs concerns for their welfare.

Owners of flat-faced dogs often think of inherited disorders, such as struggling to breathe, as normal for the breed. Some may even like to take care of an animal which is disadvantaged. This notion is misguided. Owners who buy dogs with exaggerated [physical features](#) drive a market for features that reduce the length and quality of dogs' lives.

Every breed is at risk of [inherited disorders](#), as they are bred within a closed genetic pool. But, for some breeds, these disorders are more common or more severe, and for many breeds which also have exaggerated features, the problems are exacerbated.

Animal charities encourage people looking to buy a dog to research the breed. There are [resources available to help](#) and guides on how to choose the healthiest animals within a breed. However, to really drive positive change, maybe we need to stop buying some breeds completely.

When I [first reviewed](#) pedigree dog breeding in 2009, my co-authors and I outlined actions that could improve the situation. The actions included collecting health and mortality data from all dogs, revising kennel club registration rules to prevent mating between dogs that are related, and opening up stud books to allow crossing with other breeds. None of these have yet been achieved.

But there has been some progress. For example, many kennel club [breed](#) descriptions have been subtly changed to encourage less exaggerated features. There are more DNA tests available to help breeders select the healthiest parents and researchers, including RVC, have increased data collection. But the large numbers of dogs still suffering and the popularity of these breeds suggest not enough has been done. There needs to be a shift in what the public thinks. We should look for pets that have a genetic makeup and rearing that make them likely to lead a happy, long and pain-free life.

Animal care, marketing and research professionals have vital roles to play in dog protection. But so do we all. The images we choose to share of dogs and the choices we make when we adopt or buy a pet can help spread the message that beautiful dogs are those that are healthy, happy and able to run and play.

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