

Choosing a Healthy Field Spaniel

When you buy a dog, you are adding a member to your family and making a commitment to care for the dog for many years to come. Once you have done your research on the right dog to fit into your family and lifestyle, naturally you want to buy the healthiest individual possible. How do you do that? Fortunately, Field Spaniels are healthy, sturdy dogs. Like all dogs—including mixed breeds—they carry some inherited diseases, but in general, have far fewer health problems than other closely related spaniel breeds.

Find a breeder

First, buy your dog from a breeder, not a pet store. Breeders spend their lives researching the bloodlines of their animals and trying to choose the best, healthiest breeding combinations. Your puppy's breeder can tell you of any known health problems in her or his lines, and what they mean.

Outdated books tell you to be sure to see the sire and dam. Today's breeders usually have only the mother—they carefully choose the sire and either ship the bitch or import semen for breeding. Nor will you visit and have your pick of the puppies. Breeders conduct temperament and structure evaluations. They know each puppy's personality and physical strengths or weaknesses, and can help match a puppy to the life you want it to lead, whether it is family companion, agility competitor, or hunting dog.

Breeding dogs is a hobby, not a way to make money. Breeders do it for love. The price you pay for a purebred puppy covers (sometimes!) costs such as pre-breeding health checks, the stud fee paid by the breeder, the cost of progesterone testing to ensure breeding at the right time, shipping the dam to the stud dog's home or having the semen shipped in for artificial insemination, care and tests for the pregnant bitch, delivery costs, and veterinary costs for the puppies including tail docking, dew claw removal, shots and exams. The breeder receives no compensation for the hours spent caring for mother and puppies and ensuring that each puppy is properly socialized during the crucial first eight to 12 weeks of life. Still, puppies direct from the breeder usually cost several hundred dollars less than those in a pet store.

Understand dog health

Many people new to the dog world believe that an American Kennel Club (AKC) pedigree is a guarantee of some sort. All it guarantees is that the sire and dam are registered with AKC—in other words, your new Field Spaniel is a purebred.

They also want guarantees that their new dog will be free of disease. Unfortunately, no such iron-clad guarantees are possible. Though we know more every day about canine genetics, only a very, very few genetic tests exist to show which dogs carry genes for a given disease. Breeders must go by phenotype, or what characteristics the sire, dam, and any of their ancestors actually have. A careful breeder tests each dog in his or her breeding program for diseases that have tests available, but this tells only if the sire or dam actually has the disease. It does not show whether or not they carry genes to produce the disease in their puppies. In other words, **THERE IS NO WAY TO ABSOLUTELY GUARANTEE THAT A PUPPY IS FREE OF INHERITED DISEASES.** Many of the diseases do not show up until the dog is several years old—long after it leave the breeder.

Known inherited problems

Let's look at how that works in some of the diseases Field Spaniels are known to carry. Most common are hip dysplasia and low thyroid. Less common are eye problems, heart disease and epilepsy, but because these diseases are so common in closely-related spaniels such as American Cockers, Sussex Spaniels, and English Springer Spaniels, it is important that breeders be aware of them and test for those that have tests available.

Hip dysplasia

New dog owners may be very confused about what hip dysplasia is and what the tests for it tell. Often, they want a guarantee that their puppy won't get it, and are distressed when a breeder offers only a replacement puppy or a monetary compensation. Here's why.

Scientists agree that hip dysplasia is polygenetic. Dogs must carry a certain combination of genes to pass on the condition. Exactly which genes contribute is not known. To further complicate matters, environment—particularly feeding practices and exercise—contribute to hip dysplasia. What you do with your new pup may encourage development of bad hips.

What about tests such as the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (OFA) and Penn-Hip tests? Your pup's sire and dam should have had these tests. It may be possible to reduce severity of hip dysplasia through choices of breeding stock. But remember, these tests show only how the sire and dam are affected—not what genes they carry to pass on to their puppies. The OFA test is recommended when the dog turns two.

Low Thyroid

This is a fairly common condition in Field Spaniels. Ask your breeder if these tests have been done. It can lead to sparse coat growth and weight gain, among other problems. Though there is no test to identify genetic carriers, individual dogs can be tested for thyroid problems through a simple blood test. Putting affected dogs on thyroid medication regulates the condition. Other than remembering that daily pill, low thyroid is of little consequence to the pet owner. Some scientists believe that low thyroid is part of a group of inherited autoimmune disorders, including sterility and life-threatening anemia, so breeders need to be wary of the condition.

Eye problems

All breeding stock should be tested annually by a veterinary ophthalmologist. Many breeders also have eye exams done on each puppy at about eight weeks of age. The most common eye problems in Field Spaniels are folds in the retina, ectropion and entropion. The cause of retinal folds is not known at this time. Sometimes they disappear by the end of the puppy's first year. The consequences to vision do not appear to be serious. Ectropion-saggy eyelids, and entropion-eyelids rolling in, are inherited. A dog with saggy eyelids may be more prone to infection from foreign objects in the eye. Puppies will often have loose, saggy eyelids when they are teething. Eyelids will also sag more when a dog is tired. Dogs whose eyelids roll in—much rarer in Field Spaniels—may require surgery to tighten the eyelids which scratch the cornea and will thereby damage vision if the condition remains without surgical correction. Progressive retinal atrophy, an inherited disease that shows up during adulthood in many spaniels and leads to blindness, occurs very rarely in Fields.

Heart defects

Heart problems can be inherited (genetic) or congenital (birth defects unrelated to genes.) They can be present at birth, or develop as the dog ages. For instance, a dog may be born with a slightly leaky heart valve. The defect causes no problem until the dog has dental work, releasing bacteria into the blood stream and infecting the damaged valve, leading to heart failure. If the general veterinarian detects a heart murmur, a certified veterinary cardiologist can examine dogs for certain heart defects, and advise the breeder whether the dog can pass them on to offspring. Again, there are no genetic tests to determine whether a dog unaffected by heart disease can pass the condition on.

Epilepsy

Epilepsy is a catch-all term used to describe seizures. These seizures can be caused by a genetic problem, a tumor, high fever, eating a toxic substance, or many other origins.

Early onset epilepsy, such as the inherited disease that may affect English Springer Spaniels before they are three, is almost unknown in Field Spaniels. Scientists are working to develop a genetic test for inherited epilepsy.

Field Spaniel breeders report seeing late-onset epilepsy in dogs eight or ten years old with no prior history of seizures. Veterinarians are divided on whether this is a true inherited epilepsy.

What is being done?

The Field Spaniel Society of America has an active health committee, which exchanges information with Field Spaniel groups in other countries. Periodic health surveys help monitor trends in Field Spaniel health, and ask owners and breeders for input on health concerns. The FSSA joins with the Canine Health Foundation to fund studies of diseases affecting the breed.