

New Research Identifies The Most Common Illnesses Suffered By Westies

Arlo Guthrie
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The Royal Veterinary College has announced the results of the world's largest study of West Highland White Terriers¹, which identified both the most common illnesses suffered by the breed and the most common causes of death.



The *VetCompass* study, which was based on the records of over 900,000 Westies under the care of UK first opinion veterinary practices in 2016, also found that ownership of Westies has fallen dramatically, to just a quarter of what it was a decade ago. Researchers found that the breed comprised only 0.43% of puppies born in 2015 compared to 1.69% of puppies born in 2004.

The average age of the Westies studied was a relatively elderly 7.8 years, suggesting an ageing population with fewer new puppies entering the population compared to other breed studies carried out by *VetCompass*.

The most common illnesses suffered by Westies were found to be dental disease (which affects 15.7% of Westies), ear disease (10.6%), overgrown nails (7.2%), allergic skin disorder (6.5%) and obesity (6.1%). Lower respiratory tract disease and cancer were the most common causes of death, with each accounting for 10.2% of deaths in the breed. Spinal cord disorders were the next biggest killer at 7.8%.

Other Findings Included:

- Male Westies are more likely to be diagnosed with ear disease and aggression than female Westies.
- Female Westies are more likely, however, to develop dental disease.
- The average bodyweight of the Westie is 9.6kg, with males tending to be heavier with an average weight of 10.1kg compared to the 9.0kg average of females.
- The average lifespan of the breed is 13.4 years with males outliving females at 13.8 years compared to the latter's 12.9 years.

Dr Dan O'Neill, Senior Lecturer and *VetCompass* researcher at the RVC, who was the main author of the paper, said: "With the ascent of social media as a dominant influencer of public opinion, ownership preferences for dog breeds are becoming increasingly polarised and susceptible to the whims of internet celebrity endorsement and advertising.

"Previously, preferences for dog breeds used to wax and wane gently over time. But *VetCompass* breed data now show rapid changes in preferences among breeds that create bubbles and troughs of demand that can have far-reaching implications for these breeds.

"Flat-faced (brachycephalic) breeds are currently the darling of the nation but this has created huge welfare problems for breeds such as the Pug and French Bulldog. And breeds such as the West Highland White Terrier and Cavalier King Charles have fallen sharply out of favour."

Camilla Pegram, Veterinary Epidemiologist and *VetCompass* researcher at the RVC, who co-authored the paper, said: "The most common disorders of Westies shown in this study are also common in the wider UK dog population. However, the breed does seem

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predisposed to lower respiratory tract disease which was a common cause of death in the Westie. Owners should be aware of this as their Westie ages.

“What is particularly interesting is the level of skin disorders, which although relatively high, are still lower than might have been predicted a decade ago. It is possible that the reduction in Westie ownership has relieved the pressure on breeders to breed from less healthy individuals to meet demand and

therefore contributed to improved skin health within the breed. Paradoxically, reducing popularity may have led to better health in the Westies that are now being born.”

Reference

1. O'NEILL, D. G., BALLANTYNE, Z. F., HENDRICKS, A., CHURCH, D. B., BRODBELT, D. C. & PEGRAM, C. 2019. West Highland White Terriers under primary veterinary care in the UK in 2016: demography, mortality and disorders. *Canine Genetics and Epidemiology*.

Healthcare Tips For Senior Dogs

5 Tips to Keep Your Senior Dog Healthy

By Lorie Huston, DVM

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A senior dog has different health requirements than a younger dog. Here are some tips to help you keep your senior pet healthy.

1. DON'T FORGET THE HEALTH CHECK-UPS

Make sure your senior dog has regular visits with your veterinarian. In fact, many veterinarians recommend that senior dogs should be examined twice a year, even more so if the dog has serious health issues. A thorough physical examination by your veterinarian may reveal health issues that can impact your pet's life and comfort level, such as dental disease, arthritis, heart disease, kidney disease and more.

2. NOTE ANY BEHAVIOR CHANGES IN YOUR DOG

Watch your senior dog's behavior carefully. This is important for all pets but doubly so for senior dogs. Changes in your dog's behavior may be a symptom of disease. Watch specifically for changes in your dog's appetite and water consumption. Watch for changes in urinary and bowel habits and alterations in sleep routines. If your dog suddenly becomes irritable for no reason, it may be because he is in pain, having difficulty seeing, or having a hard time hearing properly. Any changes in your senior pet's routines or behaviors should prompt a consultation with your veterinarian.

3. MAKE IT EASIER FOR YOUR DOG TO GET AROUND

Be aware that your senior dog may have pain caused by arthritis or other health issues that make it difficult for him to get around

as well as he did when he was younger. Consider providing ramps or stairs to allow your senior dog to access furniture or beds. Ramps or stairs may make it easier for your pet to get up and down the stairs, and carpeting on slippery floors may help your dog gain his footing. Your senior dog may need assistance getting into and out of the car as well.

4. CHOOSE AN AGE-APPROPRIATE DIET FOR YOUR DOG

Dietary requirements may change as your dog ages. It's important that you provide your senior dog a pet food that is age appropriate. Some older pets tend to gain weight and may need a diet for less active dogs. Others may have difficulty holding their weight and may need a diet with a higher calorie content or better palatability. Older pets also may have diseases that can be manipulated and/or controlled at least partly through diet. Your veterinarian can help you choose an appropriate diet for your senior dog based on your dog's individual nutritional requirements.

5. PIMP OUT YOUR DOG'S BED

Provide soft blankets and towels for your senior dog's bed. This will help him to rest easier and sleep better. There are even special orthopedic beds made for senior dogs. In addition to having a denser form to help cushion your senior dog's aging joints, some orthopedic beds can be outfitted with a heat and/or vibration source, which increases circulation and reduces stiffness — perfect for dogs with arthritis.