

Short-nosed (Brachycephalic) dogs – time to stand up and be counted

Brachycephalic dogs have been attracting more and more media attention of late - and that can only be a good thing.

Brachycephalic means short-nosed. Examples would be breeds such as Pugs, Boxers, British Bulldogs, some Cavalier King Charles Spaniels and Shih-Tzus, to name a few.

Over time, selective breeding has created some appalling deformities in these breeds which cause suffering and predispose them to lifelong problems with breathing, skin disorders and eye problems. Worse, this has been happening for so long that people accept these problems as *normal* for the breed and fail to consider them to be problems at all.

This article will attempt to highlight the problems and discuss what we vets, breeders, owners and prospective owners can do about it.

Breathing: So many of these dogs suffer from BOAS – *Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome*. Referral centres even have dedicated BOAS clinics, such is the number of affected dogs. BOAS is a problem caused by extreme shortening of the bony structure of the face to get the *cute* flat face.

However, the soft tissue in the mouth and throat is not reduced so all of that is squashed into a much smaller space, resulting in a much narrower airway. As a result, these dogs often snore, even when conscious, such is the effort required to breathe. To make matters worse, their nostrils are often slit-like instead of being open like a normal dog's.



Figure a: *Brachycephalic with narrowed nostrils*



Figure b: Normal, open nostrils

Why not try this - gently pinch your nostrils (*just the smallest amount*) and then breathe through your nose. Now imagine doing that for five minutes and with some light exercise.

Skin: These dogs have too much skin on their flattened faces, resulting in more (*cute*) wrinkles. These skin folds rub against each other, causing irritation. They are also a perfect warm, damp breeding ground for bacteria.

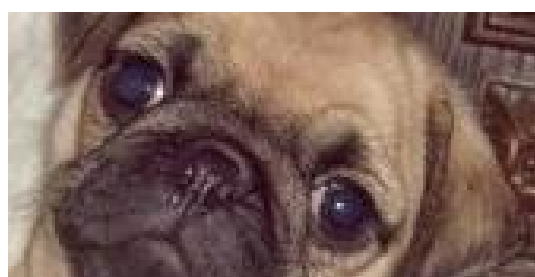
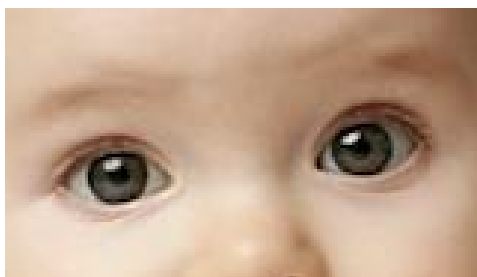
To keep the condition under control, this skin needs to be cleaned at least once daily. Often antibiotics are required when an infection can't be controlled by cleaning.

Digestion: Some brachycephalics have digestive upsets, acid reflux and gastric ulcers from the chronic inspiratory effort affecting also the upper digestive tract.

Eyes: Along with their shortened faces, these dogs have shallower eye sockets, but with normal sized eyes. This has been a desirable trait - large round eyes with the whites showing.

See the photograph of a 6-month old human baby below and compare that to an adult Pug.

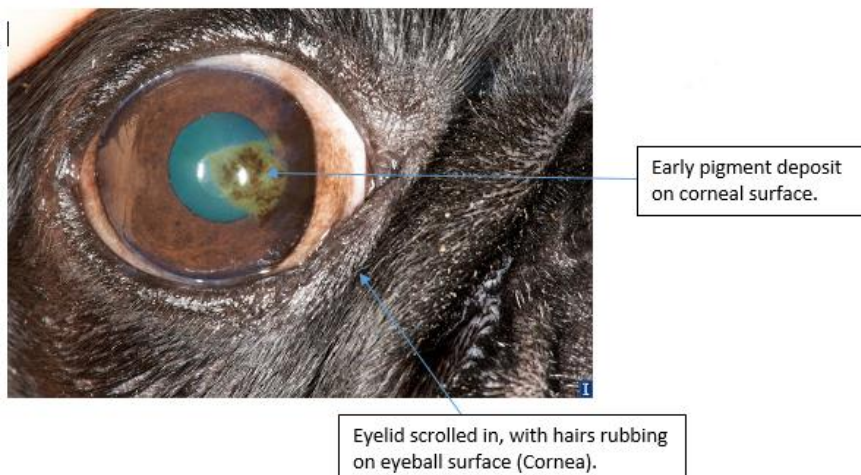
Can you see the resemblance?



One consequence of this face shape is that there is much more exposure of the sensitive clear surface of the eye, the *cornea*. Tears evaporate faster from the surface and the eye dries out. This makes it more susceptible to serious injury such as corneal



ulceration, which, particularly in the Pug, can lead to deep ulceration and even perforation and potential loss of an eye.



Deep corneal ulcer - ready to rupture

Also, because their eyelids are stretched so much, they almost always scroll inwards at the inner corner of the eye, causing hairs to rub on the eye surface. This, in turn, can increase the formation of pigment across the surface of the eye, so prevalent in Pugs.

What can we do about it?

The good news is that things can be done to make sure that individuals' suffering is alleviated, but as importantly, we need to prevent more brachycephalics being born into a life of suffering. For too long, we vets have acknowledged the issues these dogs face but not been ready to stick our heads above the parapet for fear of offending clients.

Imagine that you're a vet and someone proudly presents their perfect, snuggly little puppy, who they are already totally besotted with. Your heart sinks as you realise that the puppy's breathing is already laboured through its slit-like nostrils and increased soft tissue in its throat. The wrinkles on its nose are rubbing on the surface of its eyes and there is a lot of eye on show. If you're honest and tell them that this sweet, friendly little dog is going to suffer because of its body shape and will need surgery on its nose, throat and eyes then you're likely to seriously offend and alienate the client; they will leave and go to a vet who is more likely to 'turn a blind eye'.

So, what do you do?

Solutions:

- 1. Continue to perform corrective surgery to alleviate suffering of the worst affected**
- 2. Perform more corrective surgeries so that more than just the worst-affected are treated**
- 3. Educate our clients *before* they consider buying a brachycephalic.**

Things to consider before getting a brachycephalic:

- View the parents – listen to them breathing, look at their eyes and nostrils. Can they run around the garden without getting puffed out?
- Don't import a puppy. This may be harder to avoid than you think. Puppy farming in Europe with importation (legal or otherwise) is very lucrative business. The breeders of these sorts of imports have no interest in breeding healthy dogs and will sometimes go to great lengths to conceal the fact that they've been imported.
- Check Kennel Club (KC) registration of the parents – don't be embarrassed to ask. Get the KC name from the breeder. Most responsible breeders are passionate about what they do and will be delighted to show you the KC registration documents.
- Can you afford it? It will take generations before these noses become longer again and the eyes less protruding. Until then, if you are an owner of these

dogs, please be aware that these conformational issues can be very expensive to manage.

- It appears that many people can't or won't afford it. According to a recent BBC news article, Battersea Dogs Home and Blue Cross Animal Rescue received a total of 314 'flat-faced' dogs in 2015, compared to 226 in 2014 - an increase of 39%.

Too many people are still buying these breeds without doing their research first (or at least asking their vet for advice), completely naïve to the issues they may face.

To our clients: We ask you, as prospective owners, to do your research thoroughly. Don't forget, that we are also here to help and offer advice.

For our current owners, we ask you to please come in and see us; let's talk about it! Let us look at your pet and discuss any problems. We'd like to work with you to improve your pet's quality of life if we can.

Related articles:

Features in the Daily Mail: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3799981/Think-twice-getting-bulldogs-pugs-Vets-say-demand-flat-faced-canines-damage-health.html> ;

The BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37423040>

And a blog from high profile media vet, Dr Pete Wedderburn:

<https://www.vethelpdirect.com/vetblog/2016/05/09/vets-to-end-suffering-of-brachycephalic-dogs/>