

# Is A Dalmatian Right For You?



Puppy buyers frequently acquire a Dalmatian puppy, or any breed for that matter, without doing enough research. The cartoon and live version of "101 Dalmatians" created a demand for Dalmatian puppies. This resulted in unscrupulous commercial breeders and irresponsible backyard breeders producing poor quality dogs with the idea of making a fast buck. Unfortunately, not all the people who buy a puppy are really suited to Dalmatian ownership so many of these puppies are abandoned to shelters or relinquished to already overburdened rescue organizations before their first birthday. Before you make a mistake that may cost you hundreds of dollars and may cost an innocent puppy its life, please read the following carefully.

It is easy to see why people want a Dalmatian. They are among the most beautiful of dogs. The striking outline, the colorful decoration, the aristocratic bearing, and the effortless movement are enthralling. There is probably nothing cuter than a Dalmatian puppy. Unfortunately, it is this great appeal that has caused a problem with homeless Dalmatians.

Historically, the Dalmatian's purpose was to accompany carriages. The dogs traveled under the axle, between the lead horses, or alongside the carriage and cleared the road of stray animals. They also served as guard dogs. To be able to fulfill this purpose the Dalmatian had to be capable of covering great distances and also had to be protective. Therefore, genetically, the Dalmatian is predisposed to be very active and somewhat territorial. It is extremely important for prospective owners to understand the activity level. A well-bred Dalmatian is highly active and requires opportunity for exercise. A fenced yard and an owner willing to devote some time to active play are all that is needed. Irresponsibly bred Dalmatians are frequently hyperactive. Even frequent exercise may not settle them.

Since the Dalmatian essentially came from working temperament, they should be confident, alert the family to strangers, and, if need be, protect their family. To ensure that the dog does not become aggressive, it is necessary to provide ample opportunity for socialization. The dog must meet a variety of people and other dogs as a puppy so it can learn to distinguish friend from foe as an adult. Puppies that are not given ample socialization may become aggressive or fear-aggressive, that is, they snap or bite because they are afraid of people.

Dalmatians are fairly large dogs. An adult male will be around 23" – 24" tall and weigh close to 60 lbs. A female will be slightly smaller.

Dalmatians are very intelligent but have a tendency to be independent thinkers with a touch of class clown. This can be a hard combination to deal with for inexperienced owners. Novice owners should definitely plan to attend both puppy kindergarten and a basic obedience class. Be sure the class will be taught using motivational methods with lots of praise, treats, toys, etc. Dalmatians do not do well with jerk and pull training. In most places, there are no licensing requirements to become a trainer so check out the instructor's credentials before signing up. Instructors who are associated with the National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors may be a good choice. Even a very well trained Dalmatian may occasionally surprise an owner by coming up with some unusual behavior. It is just their way of being sure they are never taken for granted.

Dalmatians are housedogs. They are very social and need to be part of the family. Dalmatians who are confined to a yard or kennel away from family activities frequently become barkers or diggers. This is not to say a Dalmatian cannot be left alone during the day while the owners are at work. It is just that when the rest of the family is spending time together at home, the Dalmatian wants to be apart of it. The short coat renders them unsuitable to live outdoors

in cold climates. If you work during the day you will have to have some arrangement such as a doggy door to let the Dalmatian in and out. Most Dal owners provide their dogs with a sweater or coat if they will be outside for more than 10 or 15 minutes in colder climates.

Dalmatians, and other large, active breeds, are not usually a good choice as a companion for infants or toddlers. A Dalmatian puppy grows quickly and is incredibly active. Their size and activity level may be intimidating for toddlers. One good wag of a tail (and a Dalmatian tail is the closest thing to a perpetual motion machine yet) can send a young child flying. It may be amusing the first time but it does not take long for the child to become fearful of the rapidly developing puppy. Dalmatians make excellent pets for older, well-behaved children or for families where the parents will supervise interaction between the child and the dog. Infants and toddlers should never be left unsupervised with any dog.

Dalmatians shed. Owners are fond of saying that Dalmatians shed twice a year, six months in the spring and six months in the fall. The hair has barbed ends and sticks to everything. Daily brushing keeps shedding to a minimum but there is no way to stop it altogether. Fastidious housekeepers or those fond of wearing black and navy unadorned by short white hairs may find the breed unsuitable.

Dalmatians have a uric acid anomaly that can lead to the formation of urate stones that can cause a urinary obstruction. Due to the male's anatomy, obstructions occur more frequently in males than in females. For this reason it is necessary to feed a low purine diet. Foods such as organ meats, game meats etc. are highest in purines. Beef, poultry, and lamb are high in purines. Cheese, eggs, and most vegetables are low in purines. Purines form crystals in the urine. The crystals can clump together and form hard, smooth stones that can block the urethra. An obstruction is not only painful but can be life-threatening. Care in selecting food, access to water, frequent "potty breaks", and monitoring the pH of the urine can prevent obstruction. A Dalmatian should never be fed a generic or department store brand dog food. A Dalmatian who is a stone former can usually be managed on a special diet and medication.

Dalmatians can be born deaf. Other Dalmatians may have normal hearing in only one ear (unilateral hearing). The majority of Dalmatians have normal hearing in both ears (bilateral hearing). George Strain, Ph.D., Professor of Neuroscience at Louisiana State University has collected data on over 4000 Dalmatians. Incidence rates are 7.9% affected with total deafness and 21.8% affected with unilateral deafness. Responsible breeders use a method known as Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response Testing (BAER) to check the hearing of puppies at 6 - 7 weeks. This test is usually not available from your regular veterinarian as it requires special training and highly specialized, expensive equipment. It is usually done at a veterinary teaching hospital or a veterinary neurology specialty clinic. Reputable breeders also test the sire and dam. The lowest risk for producing deaf puppies occurs when both parents are bilateral hearing. Unilateral deafness in even one parent doubles the likelihood of producing deaf offspring.

Dalmatians have a relatively low incidence of hip dysplasia but it is wise to select a puppy from OFA certified parents. Hip dysplasia is a malformation of the hip socket that can be painful and can require life-long medication.

Eye problems are all but non-existent in Dalmatians but responsible breeders have their dogs' eyes checked by a veterinary ophthalmologist and register the results with CERF. Dalmatians should be checked before the eye is dilated for the regular CERF exam for a condition known as iris sphincter dysplasia.

Dalmatians may be "smilers." When a Dal smiles, he curls his lip and bares his teeth. It looks very much like a snarl but it is usually a sign of submission particularly when he thinks he may be in trouble. The Dals' theory appears to be that no one could be angry at a smiling dog. (It usually works!) However, for the uninitiated a "smile" can be a bit unnerving.

There is no right breed for every person. Some people really should not own any dog. Each breed has its own good and bad points. A Dalmatian is a wonderful companion for the right person. Please be sure you are the right person before acquiring a Dal.

