

Myths About Small Dogs That Deserve Debunking

Are small dogs really easier to care for and more likely to be couch potatoes, thereby needing less exercise than big dogs? Can they be trusted around children? It's time to set the record straight about these and other myths about small dogs that have persisted despite solid proof.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It's a myth that small dogs are easier to care for or don't require as much exercise as large dogs
- The idea that small dogs are weak and content to simply cuddle or rest on the couch is a myth; many small dogs are tenacious and strong-willed, with the attitude to match
- Research revealed a strong association between height, body weight, skull proportions (width and length), and behavior, concluding that smaller dogs show more aggression than their larger counterparts
- Dog owners may be more tolerant of undesirable behaviors in smaller dogs, which may in turn increase behaviors such as excessive barking, nipping, eliminating indoors, begging, separation anxiety and attention-seeking
- A mutation in a growth hormone-regulating gene that corresponds to small body size in dogs was present in wolves over 50,000 years ago — long before domestication

Does your petite pooch have the bark of a Great Dane and the courage of a lion? You're not alone. Many small dog guardians bristle at the notion that all little dogs are "yappy," snappy or enjoy being dressed up in costumes.

Small dogs like bichon frises and Chihuahuas are every bit as canine as German shepherds and rottweilers — and it's time to put some common small dog myths to rest.

Myth 1 — Small Dogs Don't Need a Lot of Exercise

It's a myth that small dogs are easier to care for or don't require as much exercise as large dogs. Dogs, regardless of size, should get a minimum of 20 minutes of sustained **heart-thumping exercise** at least three times a week. Most dogs can benefit from longer, more frequent sessions.

While it's true that small dogs may not be able to keep pace with a large dog when it comes to running speed or stamina on a hike, they need the same amount of physical activity to keep their weight in an optimal range and maintain their musculoskeletal system.

Regular exercise also helps with digestion and reduces boredom, helping to eliminate problem behaviors. Do not assume that because a dog is small, he's meant to sit on a couch all day or only needs to roam around a backyard.

Simply letting your dog outside in a fenced yard isn't enough to get vigorous activity — the type that both small and large dogs need. In addition to daily walks, small dogs will thrive with additional daily activity and playtime — just like large dogs.

Myth 2 — Small Dogs Aren't 'Tough'

The idea that small dogs are weak and content to simply cuddle or rest on the couch, is a myth. Many small dogs are tenacious and strong-willed, with the attitude to match. Mini dachshunds, miniature schnauzers and Jack Russell terriers are known for being protective of their families, while miniature pinschers are assertive and alert, making them excellent watchdogs.

In fact, small breeds' lack of appropriate socialization means they're often more aggressive than larger dogs that spend more time in socialization classes and ongoing training during the first 4 months of life. Many small breeds also lack the ongoing obedience training that should occur throughout the first year of life.

Myth 3 — Small Dogs Shouldn't Be Around Children

If a dog is fearful of children or aggressive, it's not due to their size but rather their environment and appropriate oversight, including whether or not they received proper socialization or have a history of abuse. And if a child, or adult, is handling a dog in a way that makes him uncomfortable, it's possible any dog will lash out, big or small.

If you're with an unfamiliar dog of any size, always let him initiate the contact instead of the other way around — and teach children this rule as well. No matter the size of the dog, it's important to know their boundaries and not put them in a situation where they may feel unsafe.

Myth 4 — Small Dogs Are 'Tiny Terrors'

It's sometimes suggested that small dogs are yappy, prone to snapping and generally more hyperactive than larger dogs. There's some truth to this, but it may be more due to the way they're treated than to an inherent small dog "tiny terror" gene.

When researchers at the University of Sydney analyzed data from over 8,300 dogs of 80 different breeds, and compared them to the shape of 960 dogs of those breeds, they revealed a strong association between height, body weight, skull proportions (width and length), and behavior, concluding that smaller dogs show more aggression than their larger counterparts.¹

However, the team suggested dog owners may be more tolerant of undesirable behaviors in smaller dogs, which may in turn increase behaviors such as excessive barking, nipping, eliminating indoors, begging, separation anxiety and attention-seeking.

They even speculated that owners of small dogs may encourage undesirable behaviors, predisposing their pets to separation anxiety, puppy-like behaviors, mounting and begging. The tendency to keep small dogs indoors, untrained and under-exercised may also be contributing factors in perpetuating this myth.

There Are Some Small Dog Differences

It's not a good idea to judge a dog on its size, but there are some real differences between small and large dogs to be aware of. **Tracheal collapse** is one potentially very serious disorder that primarily affects small dogs.

The first sign of tracheal collapse is often a dry cough. As the disease progresses, dogs often develop exercise intolerance and difficulty breathing. The condition may be present at birth, but a collapsing trachea can also develop over time and is often caused by chronic respiratory disease, Cushing's disease or heart disease.

Lifespan is another difference, as small breeds are among the longest-lived dogs. Compared to giant breed dogs, small dogs may live twice as long, possibly because they age at a slower rate.²

Have There Always Been Small Dogs?

Dogs differ in size more than any other mammal, with the largest breeds up to 40 times bigger than the smallest. It was assumed that once dogs became domesticated, small breeds like the Chihuahua and Pomeranian were the result of humans' desire for small, cute lapdogs.

However, researchers at the National Institutes of Health discovered that a mutation in a growth hormone-regulating gene that corresponds to small body size in dogs was present in wolves over 50,000 years ago — long before domestication.³

It's possible, according to Elinor Karlsson, a geneticist at the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School in Worcester, that dogs were domesticated from smaller-bodied wolves that were different from present-day grey wolf populations,⁴ suggesting the small dogs that many know and love may have existed all along.

Sources and References

¹ [PLoS One. 2013; 8\(12\): e80529](#)

² [Am Nat. 2013 Apr;181\(4\):492-505. doi: 10.1086/669665. Epub 2013 Feb 21](#)

³ [Current Biology, Volume 32, Issue 4, P889-897.e9, February 28, 2022](#)

⁴ [Nature News, January 27, 2022](#)
