

# A Dog with Cat-Like Qualities, This Easy Breed Is a Charmer

They were bred by monks to look like small lions, and to this day, they are one of the cutest and cuddliest breeds around. Good with other pets, they're considered a comfort dog who makes a devoted companion. Best of all, they come with very few health problems or grooming challenges.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Bred by Tibetan monks as watchful “hall monitors,” Tibetan spaniels aren’t really spaniels at all, but are related to the Shih Tzu, Pekinese and Lhasa Apso breeds
- With a residual protective instinct, “Tibbies” are described as bold, smart, headstrong and independent, and while they get along well with other dogs and cats, they’re reserved with strangers
- Playful and loving, the diminutive Tibetan spaniel is a “comfort” dog who makes a great companion, is devoted to his family and has very few health problems or grooming challenges to deal with
- Daily walks are great and even encouraged. They love playing with toys, and may even enjoy competitive forays involving agility courses and rallies with other dogs
- There are many breed-specific rescues that help match dogs in need with their forever home

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If you’re looking for a dog who is both cute and cuddly, but also has an air of dignity, this spirited pup may catch your eye. Tibetan spaniels are a little bit of a contradiction in other areas, too, starting with the fact that they’re not spaniels at all, but related to the Lhasa Apso breed. However, these dogs are from Tibet and have an ancient history. Tibetan monks bred them to look like small lions who might serve as (or at least appear to be) a protector in their monasteries and as a symbol of Buddha.

They were recognized even then as lively little pets, and even though they’re not now known for excessive barking tendencies, that doesn’t mean these dogs have abandoned their protective personas. They may even have a little bit of chameleon in there, being described by some as “part terrier, part monkey, and part cat.”<sup>1</sup>

Because they were highly prized, Tibetan spaniels were often exchanged as gifts between nobles and rulers in China as well as Tibet, which explains why other cousins of the breed include the Shih Tzu, Pekinese and Japanese Chin breeds.

Vet Street explains that in the late 19th century and early 20th century, British travelers and missionaries brought some of the breed to the West. They went first to England, where several litters were bred. More arrived in England in 1941; however, only one from the breeding program survived World War II.<sup>2</sup>

They didn't seem to make an impression in the U.S. until the 1960s, when a pair was imported from Tibet and subsequently produced a litter. A Lutheran Church sexton in New Haven, Connecticut imported some Tibetan spaniels from Britain, and parishioners fell in love with them. Keeping the breed nickname "Tibbies," the Tibetan Spaniel Club of America was formed in 1971. They were recognized as a breed by the American Kennel Club in 1984.

## An 'Epagneul' or Small 'Comforter' Dog

Although Tibbies may not have a monastery to run through very often any more, these dogs still have a residual protective instinct. Described as bold, smart, headstrong and independent, they nevertheless get along well with other dogs and cats. In regard to children, experts on the breed recommend older children rather than younger ones, and that's because this dog is rather small and could be injured if accosted by even a toddler. With strangers they can be quite reserved.

The independent streak makes these dogs slightly maverick when an impetuous mood strikes them. Vet Street notes that they can be show-offs because they love getting attention:

*"The Tibbie is incredibly smart and headstrong. He is determined to have his own way, so never assume that he will always obey your commands ... there's no guarantee that he will come when called and an 100% guarantee that he will take off and do something you don't want him to do, like pick a fight with a bigger dog or eat poop on the ground."*<sup>3</sup>

One of the most important functions Tibetan spaniels fill in many lives is that of companion. In the Middle Ages, the French word "epagneul" described their role as a "small comforter dog." This attribute has been a mutual boon to many who've found the breed to be an exceptionally intuitive therapy dog.

Being natural people lovers, Tibbies are never happier than when they're with their favorite people. Snuggling is also a favorite pastime, balanced by plenty of play time. But here's an interesting fact regarding their habits: They have, as hinted earlier, a touch of the feline in them, as Tibbie lovers have commented that their dogs are often found sitting on a high perch like the back of an overstuffed chair and cleaning themselves like a cat.

## Tibbies Like to Play, Run and Be Active — Just Don't Overdo It

Being a breed among many with a flat face and short legs, these guys are active to a degree, but don't expect them to keep up with you while you jog or be a mountain-climbing companion. Daily walks are great and even encouraged. They love playing with toys, and may even enjoy competitive forays involving agility courses and rallies with other dogs. However, when walking they should be leashed and yards should be fenced because this can be a wandering breed with a tendency to fearlessly explore.

Obedience class is something all breeds benefit from, including this one. These pups, like every dog, appreciate patience and consistency. Positive reinforcement is an excellent way to train them, so lavish praise, play, positive attention and food rewards make for a "win-win" to establish a mutually beneficial bond.

That said, they're also indoor dogs and should never be made to live outdoors. They like taking over the couch as much as anyone. They're apartment friendly, highly social and great watchdogs, no doubt due to their ancestry.

# Tibetan Spaniels’ Health and Grooming Tips

Some dogs may require lots of trimming and grooming, but these dogs do not. They sport a medium-length double coat, which can be nearly any color or a mix of colors. Vet Street describes what you should see when you meet a Tibetan spaniel:

*“You should see a dog with a rectangular body covered in a silky double coat, dark-brown oval-shaped eyes, medium-size ears that hang down and are well feathered, and a plumed tail that curls over the back, falling to one side.”<sup>4</sup>*

Easy to care for, you only need to brush your Tibbie’s coat a few times a week to get rid of loose hair, being careful not to neglect their ears, feet, thighs and tail, where the “feathery” fur appears. Brush them more often during their twice-a-year shedding mode. Health wise, Tibetan spaniels are a fairly hardy breed, although there are a few genetic conditions to watch for, Vet Street says. Although such problems are rare, they include:

- **Patellar luxation** (one or both knee caps are unstable and occasionally slip out of place)
- Progressive retinal atrophy (night blindness that gradually progresses to daytime blindness), entropion (in which a pet’s eyelid is inverted) and retinal dysplasia (clumps that form in the retina tissue)
- **Congenital deafness**
- Epilepsy

Tibetan spaniels usually live to be 12 to 15 years of age. They stand about 10 inches tall at the shoulder and weigh as much as 15 pounds.

## Petite but Plucky, Tibbies Make Lovable Companion Dogs

Some dogs are known as retrievers or guard dogs or working dogs. Tibetan spaniels are the lovers; they make wonderful companions. A plus is that, being as small as they are, they’re great lap dogs and won’t take up too much room in your bed. If you are considering learning more about this wonderful breed contact a Tibetan spaniel rescue organization.

### Sources and References

<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup> [Vetstreet July 7, 2011](#)

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