Perhaps the most common misunderstanding about dogs is that they're all pretty much the same animal in different natural fur suits. In fact the various breeds are very different from each other in a lot more ways than appearance. The following notes about whippets may help you decide if the breed is right for you and/or get off to a good start with your new dog or puppy. As with any breed, there are negatives as well as positives and it's important to go in with your eyes open when you acquire any dog.

Though the whippet is a beautiful, elegant breed, choosing a dog for looks only is about as successful as choosing a husband or wife based entirely on appearance. The chances of a working relationship coming out of a pairing like that are fairly low.

The most important consideration in choosing a dog is its heritage. What was it bred to do? True, not many dogs are used for their original functions any more, but the instincts that were bred into them for generations are mostly still there. The whippet was developed to course and kill small game. Prey drive -- the desire to chase a fast moving object, catch it, and grab it -- is still alive and strong in the breed. Whippets are excellent pets for many people, but prey drive is something the whippet owner should never forget or underestimate.

Not everyone who owns whippets will agree with all of the following article. But it's a summary of what we have personally observed about whippets as pets over the years, and what we think you might expect. All whippets are individuals, and there are exceptions to every rule...but don't get a whippet and expect her to act like the Lab or collie you had as a kid. She won't!

We suggest you read all of this page before deciding on whippets as your breed, but you can get to the individual topics by clicking on them below.

Personality

These are playful but gentle dogs. Rough handling, even in play, is an absolute no-no and you'll get the best training results with treats and praise. They respond very poorly to force-training.

Sighthounds are traditionally considered rather aloof dogs, but whippets are an exception to that. This is one of the most affectionate of breeds; most of them love all the petting and belly rubs you'll give, and many are real snugglers. We do meet the occasional reserved whippet, but in our experience, over-exuberance is much more common. The "Cool Joe" whippets are very loving, too, just not quite as physical.

Whippets are sometimes referred to as "Velcro dogs." You might have more company than you want in the bathroom, and if you go out to the mailbox, you may be greeted just as enthusiastically upon your return as you would be after a two-week absence. This is more togetherness than some people like, and if you really prefer an independent dog, a Basenji might be a better choice.

You'll be wise to keep your whippet close to you anyway, especially at first. Whippets are mischievous! Clever and cute (but annoying) behavior such as leaping to the kitchen counter and scouting for food or tearing up a sofa cushion to make it softer is common, especially in puppies and young adults. (See Would an Adult Whippet be a Better Choice?) Whippets do mellow out around two or three years old, but as puppies, they can really be monsters. This is not a pup you want to leave loose in the living room while you run to the store!

Whippets will want to share your bed as well as the couch. In fact, if you are really fussy about dogs on your furniture, you might want to reconsider choosing a whippet. A whippet in good condition has very little "natural" padding and hard surfaces are distinctly uncomfortable. You'll seldom see one willingly lying on a bare floor. Whippets love their comfort; the softest chair or pillow your boy can find probably will become his favorite.If you use a crate, provide a soft mat. Like cats, many of them seem to enjoy perching in higher places...the back of the couch, the top of the sideboard, even the dining room table. Obviously, some training is required!

Crate training is a good idea for your puppy...you have to take a shower sometime and the little scamp can get into all manner of things while you're occupied. However, the desire to be around people also makes some whippets hard to crate successfully; some howl and moan in their crates even if properly crate-trained as puppies.

Separation anxiety is discussed as a breed problem, but as in many others, it is often over-diagnosed. Whippets who are unhappy with their living arrangements tend to let you know about it. We've heard many a story about a whippet with "severe separation anxiety" who is fine when placed in a home where he receives more attention.

This breed does seem to do better in a two- or multi-dog household. Hounds are pack animals, even more so than other types of dogs, and most whippets like doggy company as well as human company. This is very important, especially if the humans are away during the day. We always tell our puppy buyers that they will be back for another one. Whippets are the original "potato chip" dog. No one can have just one!

Appearance

The whippet is the mid-sized version of the three greyhound-type breeds. Smallest is the Italian Greyhound, a toy dog, and the largest is the well-known greyhound. The American Whippet Club describes the breed as "A medium size sighthound giving the appearance of elegance and fitness, denoting great speed, power and balance without coarseness....Should convey an impression of beautifully balanced muscular power and strength, combined with great elegance and grace of outline."

The whippet is 18" to 22" at the shoulder, and generally weighs between 25-35 pounds, with females at the smaller end of the range. Their coats are short and close, requiring little grooming, but they do shed as much as any other dog.

Good breeders choose dogs to carry on the genes according to the "standard," sort of a blueprint established by the American Whippet Club. It offers a detailed description of what the ideal whippet should look like, from size of eyes and ears to length of the tail. The standard is available on the American Whippet Club website and on the AKC site.

History

The whippet is a relatively young breed, originating in England in the 1800s. Most commonly listed as its ancestors are the Greyhound, the Italian Greyhound, and the Bedlington, Manchester, and English White Terriers. Whippets were once called Snapdogs, because of their ability to snap up and kill rats and hares. They were also referred to as the "poor man's Greyhound," as they were often kept by coal miners who raced them for sport. These early whippets were often the most valuable thing the working man owned, and they lived in their owners' houses, sleeping by the fire or curled up in bed with their people. Many were said to be fed better than the miners' own families.

Housing

True to their history, whippets are house dogs. They are not psychologically or physically suited to being kept in a yard and they are not especially happy as kennel dogs. They certainly enjoy (and need) a daily romp in the yard or an hour or so spent stretched out in the sun, but as a rule, you should not plan to leave your whippet in the yard while you are gone all day. Because of the low percentage of body fat they carry, these dogs have very little natural insulation against the elements. They overheat rather easily and they suffer terribly from the cold. In the winter a coat or sweater should be provided. If you don't plan on keeping your dog in the house, you should choose a dog more suited to outdoor life.

Children

Whippets are not nearly as delicate as they appear and are usually excellent with gentle

children . As long as a child is old enough to know how to treat him and is taught how to play with dogs, a whippet is a good choice for a child. A very young child should never be left alone with a dog of any breed and interaction between a child and a puppy must be closely supervised, for the protection of both. For some excellent information about kids and dogs, see Diamonds in the Ruff: Toddlers and Dogs
. If you have older children, they'll enjoy the activity-intensive How to Love Your Dog
.

Strangers

As a rule, whippets are friendly with strangers, often even if not introduced! Whippet owners even have a name for this never-meets-a-stranger personality trait. We call it "excessive greeting disorder" and warn people to be ready for a two minute whippet-intensive encounter when they arrive at the house. Whippets are rarely much good as watchdogs. As a rule, this is not a very vocal breed, and some hardly ever bark at all. (There are exceptions.) Whippets are too small to be useful for protection. If you need a watchdog, get a Doberman!

Cats

Whippets were bred to course and kill rabbits...small furry prey that runs. Though most whippets are not used for that purpose today, they are still bred with that instinct in mind, and the ones who are coursed and raced are bred specifically for high prey drive. Very few whippets are born without it. Even if your dog is raised with your cat and loves and plays gently with it, if he ever sees the cat running outside, it won't be his beloved Muffy, but prey. And whippets are "kill hounds." They don't play with their prey or bring it back alive. By the way he realizes that it was Muffy he was chasing, it will be too late.

Some owners do keep cats and whippets together successfully, but our experience has not been happy. The prey drive instinct is "hard-wired" into these dogs and even the best training cannot be guaranteed to control basic instinct. Not all whippets will kill a running cat, but most of them will. If you do have a whippet and a cat, we suggest never leaving them alone together unsupervised, and certainly you should never put the two outside at the same time.

The same advice applies to small dogs, especially very furry ones Whippets play roughly with other dogs, and part of their play is to chase and grab. A small, fast-moving dog is not really a good companion.

Along the same line, if your whippet has a yard, he's liable to kill something. Birds, squirrels, opossums...anything that wanders in is fair game. This can be traumatic for some people. If your own nature is too sensitive to be able to love a dog that kills wildlife, consider a collie instead of a whippet.

Training

Whippets are sighthounds, bred to chase without commands from the handler. While generally not stubborn, they're independent and not the easiest breed to train. Don't let that discourage you: They are very intelligent and all can learn house manners easily, like sit, down, and stay. Some do well with more advanced obedience, including obedience competition. Most enjoy lure coursing (chasing a plastic bag pulled by a string) and racing and are also good in agility and flyball comptition. But if you are looking for a dog to make your name in the competitive obedience world, get a Border collie!

Housebreaking

A whippet's desire to to be clean makes him one of the easiest breeds to housetrain. Using a crate will make your job much simpler. Puppies can be housetrained with the usual positive methods. Never punish a dog for an accident; you'll just teach him to hide from you when he goes in the house! Just take him outside without comment and praise him when he uses the correct place.

A new home can be stressful at first so even a housetrained adult can make mistakes early on. Some males may 'mark' (lift a leg on) walls, furniture, etc., indoors. This is true of any breed -- it's not a whippet-only characteristic -- and usually happens only if there are other males in the household. Neutering helps most of these guys, and you might want to add a "belly band" to his wardrobe if it becomes a problem.

Exercise

Whippets need a regular chance to run. A large fenced yard (say at least 100' long) is ideal. If you don't have that, you'll need to visit a neighborhood tennis court or other large fenced area three or more times a week. Whippets are usually calm in the house but most have spells of running and leaping about in play a few times a day. These 'tears' are rarely destructive; whippets are not given to bodyslamming the bookcase or clearing the coffeetable with a sweep of the tail. If your whippet is more active in the house than you like, he is probably not be getting enough exercise.

The Loose Whippet

Many dogs will stay around your home nearly all the time if you let them out, but not your whippet. Something (a cat, a squirrel, a piece of paper blowing across the street...) will catch his eye and he'll be gone, at up to 35 miles-per-hour. Other breeds that run off will usually come back in no more than a few hours if they don't get hit by a car. Probably not your whippet: At that speed, by the time he slows down, he may be completely lost.

Most dogs can be taught to COME when called but very few whippets ever get 100% reliable. Again, it's training versus instinct. Your whippet must be either leashed or in a securely fenced yard every time he's out for his whole life. A 4' fence is enough if a whippet is not a jumper or climber. Some do dig, but it's not too common a problem.

Security is critical. We don't even walk a whippet from the house to the car without a leash. It is amazing how quickly the worst can happen, and the first time a sighthound gets away from you can easily be the last. It's tempting to become casual about it when your whippet is generally obedient and calm. Remember that if he's okay off-lead 99 times out of 100, that 100th time could be the day you lose your best friend. Nearly every week on the internet there is a whippet reported missing, and too often these stories end sadly.

If your whippet does get away from you, don't chase him. There's no way you'll catch him. If at all possible, get his attention. (This is nearly impossible if he is chasing something, however.) Then fall on the ground and begin laughing and shrieking. He will come back just to see why in the world you are acting so strangely. Don't grab at him. Calmly take his collar and vow never to let go of him again.

Health

Whippets are one of the healthiest breeds. They require the same routine care as any dog: trimming toenails, cleaning of ears and teeth, occasional baths. They have to be kept up to date on shots, free of heartworms and fleas, and checked for intestinal parasites regularly.

Though all breeds have some genetic defects, none have been proven to be a serious problem in whippets thus far. Some isolated incidents of deafness and some genetic eye defects have been reported, but they are rare. There have been a few reports of a bleeding disorder called von Willebrands. Many breeders do test for those and screen for eye and hearing disorders.

The most serious health question facing us now is cardiac. The Whippet Health Foundation is funding a long-range study to determine whether a genetic heart problem is common in the breed.

Sighthounds are sensitive to anesthesia and other medications. Partly because of their low percentage of body fat, these dogs are extremely sensitive to some very common drugs; what may seem like a normal dose for a dog of his weight could easily kill a sighthound. This is certainly not to say that whippets cannot be safely anesthetized or that they should not take prescribed medicines; just be sure that your vet is aware of sighthounds' special requirements and that he knows which anesthetics are safe.

Finally, Whippet skin is thin, rather tightly stretched, and poorly protected by the scant coat. What would be a small cut on another breed can become an ugly tear on your whip. Unless blood is actually spurting out this is not an emergency but may require a vet to stitch him up so the injury will heal.

Leads and Collars

If your whippet wears a collar around the house, for daily wear we recommend flat nylon "breakaway" collars with nylon fasteners. Whippets play roughly with each other, and the breakaway latch is a safety measure in case a tooth is caught in a collar. Unfortunately we've heard many stories of dogs of all breeds badly injured or killed when one became tangled in the other's collar.

For outings we use very wide, flat lead-and-collar combinations called 'sighthound leads.' Even the best-trained whippet may lunge to the end of the lead when he sees 'prey' (anything small and fast moving!) and the wide collar stops his progress without injuring his throat. A martingale construction keeps the collar from tightening to the point of injury without allowing him to slip out when it's loosened.

Never use a metal choke chain on a whippet. Be sure to keep an ID tag on your whippet at all times, and we recommend tattooing and microchipping in addition to collar tags.

How Much Does a Whippet Cost?

Though the price of a whippet puppy or young adult varies from region to region, it's in the ballpark of $700 - $1200 in the eastern part of the United States. Prices may be higher in the Northeast and California. The majority of whippet breeders don't make money on their puppies. With genetic testing, routine care for the mother, vet care for the puppies, and a dozen other expenses, they often don't so much as break even. Breeding dogs, done right, is a rather expensive hobby rather than a business. Rescue's adoption fee is around $250-300.

Finally...

.... whippets, like people, are individuals. The guidelines given here cover most of the whippets we have known, but for every rule we've known a whippet who didn't fit. Obviously we think this breed is the greatest. We also want to be sure anyone acquiring a whippet knows their special challenges before taking one home.

Please see Reasons Not to Get a Whippet at Kismet Sighthounds for a listing of just about every potential drawback of whippets! We also recommend the American Whippet Club's site, especially the Frequently Asked Questions page. And if you have further questions, contact us!