

Breed Profile: Chihuahua

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Photo taken in Cromwell, courtesy of Craig Turner-Bullock from Furtography. From left to right: Arkady Sweet Little Lies for Kitaco, GR CH, GR JNR CH, NZ CH Mystic Legion Narcissus and Loki (the author's first Chihuahua).

The smallest of all purebred dogs, Chihuahuas are intelligent and sassy with very distinct personalities. They are social, very loving and extremely loyal dogs that typically do well with children and other animals, if introduced properly. A true toy dog, the Chihuahua is a companion breed which craves attention and human contact. They will happily spend the day on a lap, or out and about in the big wide world, provided they feel safe with their Significant Human at their side.

As a pack, they prefer their own breed for company and often do better in pairs, rather than as lone pets. The joke that 'Chihuahuas are like potato chips: you can't stop at one' is based on the real preference for Chihuahuas to have a companion of their own kind, a fact many Chihuahua owners discover once they've acquired their first pet and soon find themselves on the hunt for a second.

They are part of the Toy Group and classed as a brachycephalic breed because of their short noses compared their head size. Since the 1960s, the Chihuahua has been one of the most popular breeds

registered by the AKC in the US. They rank 10th on the list of top 10 most popular breeds in New Zealand.

The Chihuahua's ratio of brain to body means this breed has the largest brain in relation to their size and owners often underestimate how clever or how good at problem solving Chihuahuas can be. They usually discover this when their Chihuahua demonstrates a Houdini-like ability to escape from what their owners were quite certain was a secure enclosure.

Because of their intelligence, Chihuahuas are very trainable, but they can be wilful and require a firm but loving hand. They do quite well when competing in Agility and Obedience trials and make good service dogs, particularly for the blind, and as emotional support or canine therapy animals.

Chihuahuas thrive on love. They are at their best when they trust the person handling them and can be suspicious of strangers. More shy dogs will often bond to one person in particular and owners need to be careful not to encourage 'guarding' aggression in these

dogs, which are prepared to take on anyone they perceive as coming between them and their chosen human.

Being a small dog in danger of being carried away by hawks or eagles in the wild, Chihuahuas instinctively flinch when approached with a hand above their head, which they perceive as danger, something canny judges understand.

Often maligned in the show ring as a 'bucket breed' (as in, you need to keep a bucket of water handy to rinse away the blood after handling them) an experienced judge will approach a Chihuahua on the table with a kind word and a quick chest or chin rub to establish trust, before going over the head and mouth, to circumvent this instinctive behaviour. This is also something to teach children when handling Chihuahuas.

A Chihuahua in good health can expect to live 15-18 years, and it is not uncommon for them to live to 20.

History



Techichi dog carrying corn, National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City, by Juan Carlos Fonseca Mata. commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Techichi_en_el_Museo_Nacional_de_Antropologia_(Ciudad_de_México).jpg

The Chihuahua we know today was discovered in the 1850s in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, from which the breed takes its name. Americans brought the dogs home with them from Mexico and they began to be shown in 1890. A Chihuahua named Midget became the first Chihuahua registered with the American Kennel Club in 1904.

The breed's popularity took off in the 1930s and 1940s when it was associated with dance king and Latin music bandleader Xavier Cugat and his constant companion, Pepe.

The Chihuahua is generally acknowledged as a direct descendant of the Techichi, a small desert dog dating back as far as the Mayan civilisation. These pre-Columbian dogs resembled Chihuahuas in

both size and shape and are believed to have been domesticated by the ancient Toltecs. The remains of dogs resembling Chihuahuas have been found in the pyramids at Cholula on the Yucatan Peninsula, which predate the 16th century.

The Aztecs, who eventually conquered the Toltecs, adopted the Chihuahua as a sacred icon of the upper class. It's believed the dogs were used in religious ceremonies to redress sins and as guides for the spirits of the dead. Christopher Columbus even refers to a tiny dog in a letter to the king of Spain.

Sadly, the Techichi is extinct, but depictions in historic relics suggest they possessed similar distinctive physical characteristics commonly seen in modern Chihuahuas. Their unique 'apple head' skull shape is just one of many notable similarities and studies conducted by the Institute of Technology in Stockholm confirm that roughly 70% of modern Chihuahua's DNA originates from the ancient South American Techichi. (*Pre-Columbian origins of Native American dog breeds, with only limited replacement by European dogs, confirmed by*

mtDNA analysis. Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, royalsocietypublishing.org)

The mysterious remaining 30% of Chihuahua DNA has long been the topic of debate. Evidence suggests it most likely came from a breed outside of Mexico, but which breed remains a mystery. The Chinese Crested has been offered as one plausible source of the missing DNA and a case can be made for sailors bringing their small dogs with them on trade journeys to South America, as the Chinese Crested's lineage can be traced to port cities around the world. It's not unreasonable to assume these trading ships might be how the Chinese Crested ended up in Central and South America, where the breed was then introduced to the Aztecs who crossbred them with the Techichi, resulting in a new breed.

Other theories suggest the 30% unidentified DNA can be traced back to either the Mexican Xoloitzcuintli or the European Maltese pocket dog.

Supporters of the Maltese theory usually turn to Italian Renaissance art, specifically Sandro Botticelli's 1482 fresco *Scenes from the Life*

of Moses, on the southern wall of the Sistine Chapel, painted only 10 years before Columbus sailed to the Americas. This renowned painting features a small white dog that is strikingly similar to the Chihuahua we know today.

The first Chihuahuas introduced into Australia arrived in December 1955, brought in by Mrs EM MacMahon of Victoria. New Zealand's earliest known pedigree Chihuahuas were a litter of three Long Coats registered in 1959: Gautamala Tio Pablo, Gautamala Tia Maquita and Gautamala Tia Rio Rita. Sadly, there are no further details on the Dogs New Zealand database about where these dogs came from, what their pedigree might be, or who bred or owned them.

Varieties

There are two varieties of Chihuahua, Long Coat and Smooth Coat, which have been shown as separate breeds since the AKC separated them in 1954. This decision to show them as separate breeds led to many countries banning the breeding of Long to Smooth, a ruling which has since been reversed around the world as breeders realised how the restriction has decimated the Smooth Coat variety.

Genetically, Long and Smooth Coat Chihuahuas are separated by a single gene, of which the Smooth Coat gene is dominant. A Smooth Coat may produce Long Coat progeny, but Long Coats, because they do not carry the dominant Smooth Coat gene, cannot produce Smooth Coat progeny. As Long Coats grew in popularity, the dominant gene was eliminated from the gene pool with every Long Coat litter born. As a consequence, Smooth Coat numbers have dwindled by an alarming degree.

Long Coat Chihuahuas only shed twice per year, while Smooth Coats shed all year around. Long Coat bitches will drop their coats after every season and after each litter, which is why males, who are not subject to this hormone-driven shedding cycle, tend to have thicker and more luxurious coats.

There are specific descriptions used for the hair on Long Coat Chihuahuas: 'Fringe', the tips of the ears; 'furnishings', on the legs; and 'plume', the fluff on the tail.

Defining Characteristics



A Chihuahua's head must be apple domed (see above): this is the only breed with an apple dome shaped skull, and this, more than any other feature, defines the breed. The notion of a deer head variety to explain away a dog with a long nose and flatter head is a made-up term used to validate poor examples of the breed and is a disqualifying fault in many countries.

The Chihuahua has a tiny mouth and teeth with very shallow roots. Without regular veterinary dental care tooth loss as early as three years old is not uncommon. The New Zealand breed standard calls for a level or scissor bite but does not specify the number of teeth.



The Chihuahua's body should be slightly longer than the height at shoulder, and its tail should be sickle-shaped (see above). This is often a fault hidden in long coat dogs, where the plume hides the fact that the tail is too long and crosses over the back, which is unacceptable. The above pair of photos also illustrate the correct

body — slightly longer than the height at the shoulder — of the first dog; the other dog's body is too long.

The Breed Standard

Characteristics An alert and swift moving little dog with a saucy expression.

General Appearance Small, dainty and compact with a brisk forceful action. A well rounded 'Apple Dome' skull with or without molero, cheeks and jaws lean, nose moderately short, slightly pointed. Definite stop.

Eyes Full, round but not protruding, set well apart, dark or ruby. Light eyes in light colours permissible.

Ears Large, set on at an angle of about 45 degrees; this gives breadth between the ears.

Mouth Level, scissor bite.

Neck Slightly arched, of medium length.

Forquarters Shoulders should be well up, lean, sloping into a slightly broadening support above straight forelegs that are set well under, giving free play at the elbows.

Body Level back, slightly longer than the height at shoulder. Well-sprung ribs with deep brisket.

Hindquarters Muscular with hocks well apart, neither out nor in, well let down.

Feet Small with toes well split up, but not spread, pads cushioned. Fine pasterns (neither 'Hare' nor 'Cat' foot). A dainty foot with nails moderately long.

Tail Medium length carried up or over the back. Preferred furry, flattish in appearance, broadening slightly in the centre and tapering to a point.

Coat, Smooth Of soft texture, close and glossy.

Coat, Long Of soft texture (never coarse or harsh to the touch) either flat or slightly wavy. No tight curly coat. There should be feathering on the feet and legs, pants on the hind legs, a large ruff on the neck is desired and preferred, the tail should be long and full as a plume.

Colour Any colour or mixture of colours, except merle.

Weight Up to 2.7kg (6lbs) with 0.9 to 1.8kg (2-4lbs) preferable. If two dogs are equally good in type, the more diminutive preferred.

Faults Cropped tail, broken-down ears.

Male animals should have two apparently normal testicles fully descended into the scrotum.

Health of Chihuahuas

Patella luxation (dislocated kneecap) is a common problem for Chihuahuas. A significant portion of the population suffers from this genetic condition, which responsible breeders will screen for and not breed from afflicted parents. Patella luxation can become progressively worse over time and can be recognized by characteristic hopping as affected dogs intentionally try to keep weight off a problematic leg. Instead of walking or running, a Chihuahua suffering from this condition will typically hold up their leg (usually the back) because the kneecap locks up and is painful to walk on.

Treatment options are limited. Chihuahuas with Grade I or II patella luxations should be closely watched. High jumps can frequently cause their kneecap to slip out of its place and lockup. The dog needs to avoid placing pressure on the leg with the luxation. For dogs suffering from grade III or IV patella luxation, surgery may be recommended depending on the severity of the condition.

Cryptorchidism (retained testicle) is a hereditary condition that can be passed on from affected sires and dams to their male and female young. Only the male offspring display the disorder but affected female offspring can carry the genes through to the next

generation thereby passing the disorder on.

Certain congenital abnormalities are linked to cryptorchidism. These include patella luxation, shortened or kinked tail, tetralogy of Fallot (a life-threatening heart defect), tarsal deformity (abnormal legs), microphthalmia (abnormally small eyes), and upper eyelid agenesis (eyelids that don't develop).

Dental Issues Dogs in the wild chew all the time and their teeth need the stimulation of chewing for good dental hygiene. Chicken necks daily and sometimes deer-hide chews, deer, lamb and pig ears. Kong® toys or toothbrush shaped Greenies® are also excellent chewing choices. These clean their teeth and importantly, work and develop neck and jaw muscles.

Chihuahuas often need to have retained baby teeth removed at about six months. If left in place, they will affect the position of the dog's adult teeth and the formation of their jaw, and increase the likelihood of dental problems later on. They also require a dental under general anaesthetic every two-three years to remove tartar build-up and preserve their gum health.

Poor dental hygiene can cause heart problems later in life and significantly shorten a dog's lifespan. Gum disease is a quick way for bacteria and infection to get into the bloodstream, where it can lodge in the heart and in the kidneys. Congestive heart and kidney failure are two of the leading causes of death in older Chihuahuas. It is vital to keep a Chihuahua's teeth and gums healthy to ensure a long and happy life.

Anal glands, the two small, grape-shaped glands located just under the skin at four o'clock and eight o'clock to the anus. The fluidy, odoriferous material they normally produce is used by dogs, cats, and other small mammals to lend a unique scent to their stool, thereby identifying it as their own.

In Chihuahuas, the ducts into the gland can become blocked and instead of emptying each time the dog defecates, they fill up and can become quite painful. If you ever see a dog 'scooting', or scraping their bottom along the ground, this is usually due to full or blocked anal glands. It is a popular myth that this behaviour is a result of worms, but in 99.99% of cases, it means they need their anal glands emptied.

Reverse sneezing — inspiratory paroxysmal respiration — sounds awful, as if the dog is choking or has something stuck in their throat, and is quite common in Chihuahuas. It generally occurs because the soft tissue at the top of the dog's mouth (the soft palate), catches over the cartilage flap that covers the windpipe (trachea) during swallowing (the epiglottis). This causes a vacuum to occur in the throat and leads to the reverse sneezing.

The dog should sort it out themselves after a minute or two. You might be able to help by covering their nose (effectively making them hold their breath) and scratching their throat. Lightly blowing in a Chihuahua's face can help, too, as it forces them to swallow a couple of times, which can clear their throat and stop the reverse sneezing.

If the reverse sneezing is prolonged or leads to them fainting from lack of air (syncope), it must be checked by a vet since there may be something more serious going on, such as a collapsing trachea.

Breeding

Chihuahuas typically birth between one and four pups — the Guinness World Record is 11! — and they have the highest rate of Caesarean sections among all purebred dogs.

The apple shape of the pup's head in relation to the dam's narrow birth canal often necessitates intervention and also explains the popularity of promoting the incorrect deer head type among puppy farmers, since these narrower, more streamlined heads are less likely to need surgical intervention and therefore cost less to breed.

Hydrocephalus puppies with signs of an abnormally large head as fluid accumulates are also an issue with this breed, sadly sometimes prized as 'hypertype'.

Pups are usually between 100-160g at birth. To put this in perspective, a Chihuahua giving birth to four 130g puppies is roughly equivalent to a 70kg human woman giving birth to four 3kg babies.

The Teacup Myth

One of the most pervasive Chihuahua myths is the existence of the 'Teacup' Chihuahua. There is no separate classification for 'Teacup Chihuahua'. It is not a separate breed or variety. Just as there is no apple head or deer head variety, Teacup, like deer head, is a marketing term coined by puppy farmers to make their runts and poor breed type seem more valuable than regular Chihuahuas.

As with any breed, puppies can be born smaller than average for any number of reasons, including, but by no means limited to, disability, growth hormone deficiency, liver shunt, hydrocephalus, heart problems, reduced nutrients in the womb, gestation position or genetics. These medical reasons for an unusually small pup can often severely shorten its life span.

The other problem, which we have seen so many times, is that an expensive, rare Teacup Chihuahua is just a regular old Chihuahua. As backyard breeders prefer larger dogs which are more likely to whelp naturally, an adorable Teacup puppy might grow into a 5kg monster-pup. It might be healthy as a horse, but it's almost the size of one, too!

Sadly, there is an industry that has grown up around the idea of Teacups, and not just in the Chihuahua breed. There are thousands of websites out there, offering hints on their care and maintenance and how to acquire them. A Chihuahua, according to the breed standard, should be between 2-3kg.

You will often hear people say Chihuahuas are not aware of their size, but the opposite is true. They are acutely aware of their size and have no real defence against attack except making lots of noise. For this reason, they also make excellent guard dogs. As the saying goes, whoever invented the doorbell did not own a Chihuahua.

They are loyal, affectionate dogs who bring true joy to those who own them, something it is hard to explain to people who have never known the love of a Chihuahua. 🐾



Mexico (NZ CH Eldivino Senor Mexico) is a Canine Friends Pet Therapy dog owned by the author's mum, Jenny Ryan.