

FRENCH BULLDOG PHYSICAL HEALTH AND CONFORMATION

In French Bulldogs, there are some structural problems associated with the breed's constitution that one should keep in mind when assessing conformation. The rapid growth in our breed (whose registrations increased by over 50% from 2003 to 2004) suggests that some of the increase in numbers is due to puppies produced by dogs and bitches who really should not be bred, either because they do not conform well to the breed standard, or because they carry some potentially inheritable condition that should not be perpetuated, or both.

French Bulldogs are classified structurally and developmentally as a brachycephalic and chondrodystrophic breed. That is, a brachycephalic Frenchie skull typically has a very short face compared to the length of the cranium; and the other bones in the skeleton show an abnormal type of development, chondrodystrophy, that results in a shortening of the vertebrae and of the long bones of the limbs. The chondrodystrophic and brachycephalic skeleton is, though characteristic of the breed, structurally abnormal, with the potential to cause some inherent physical problems.

First, the facial bones and tissues of a brachycephalic dog are so compressed that its airway is often impaired by several related defects (stenotic nares, elongated soft palate, excess tissue in the throat, too-crowded nasal cavities; and secondary changes in the larynx that these primary defects can produce over time). These are collectively called the Brachycephalic Syndrome. The only *visible* part of the airway are the openings to the outside, the nares. These should be open rather than pinched, and their openings should not have been surgically enlarged. Though you can't see a dog's palate, throat, nasal cavities, or larynx, you can usually tell whether it has airway problems by watching and listening to it. **If a Frenchie cannot walk around the ring in cool weather without becoming obviously stressed and showing noisy and labored breathing, it does not have a good airway.**

The spine of a chondrodystrophic breed is also shortened by its abnormal type of development. Although the breed standard calls for a short and compact body, it should not be too short as the standard also calls for good proportion. Frenchies have a high incidence of vertebral malformations, and also of premature degeneration of the intervertebral discs. The shorter the back, the more extreme the degree of malformation of the vertebrae. As the spine is excessively shortened the size of the chest cavity is reduced, which restricts the lung capacity and compromises an already marginal respiratory system. Excessive shortening can also affect gait, particularly if the dog is so close coupled that its gait is crabbed as it tries to prevent its hind feet overtaking its front feet. Though a Frenchie's movement is not weighted as heavily in the standard as that of many breeds, **its movement should be "unrestrained, free and vigorous."** If the spine is so short that there is not enough length of neck, the reach of the forelimbs will be reduced, as the neck muscles that move the forelimbs forward will be unable to shorten sufficiently to produce a good forward motion at the shoulder.

Frenchies' eye openings should be round, with no white showing when the dog is looking forward, and located on the front of the skull rather than on the sides (where they are situated on long-faced breeds). Frenchies occasionally have cherry eye (enlarged and prolapsed gland of the nictitating membrane), entropion, a visible haw (nictitating membrane), dermoid cysts (rapidly enlarging growths usually found on the margin of an eyelid or on the cornea), and juvenile cataracts. These conditions are not considered desirable, and may be inheritable.

The coat of a French Bulldog should be fine, smooth, and shiny, and the skin soft and loose, forming wrinkles at the head and throat. However, many Frenchies have one or more skin problems. In addition to skin lesions caused by atopy or by food or flea allergies, they may also have autoimmune skin disorders as well as hypothyroidism-induced hair loss. The deep wrinkles of the face should be kept clean and dry, as should the areas between the toes, to prevent infections from developing in these dark, moist areas. Good grooming, proper nutrition, good veterinary care, and an attempt to avoid breeding animals with known immune-mediated disorders are necessary to minimize the skin disorders found in the breed.

Finally, and importantly, **a Frenchie should have a sound temperament** as well as a sound body. Although any dog may develop a bad disposition if maltreated, it is possible for a line of dogs to show bad temperaments. Even a perfect conformation cannot compensate for a bad temperament in a dog whose primary function is to be a companion.