



## Shelter Health: The Real Story

Many people have considered adopting a shelter dog, but are put off by the “unknown” factor. What if the dog is sick or has a chronic condition that you don’t know about? We’ve all heard horror stories about seriously ill dogs adopted from shelters.

The truth is, many shelter dogs are healthy, while some suffer from easily treatable conditions (such as kennel cough) and a small number have more serious or chronic medical problems. The following information can help you learn about shelter medical care before you adopt.

In most shelters, veterinary staff evaluate the dogs at intake. They vaccinate and de-worm the dogs and look for signs of illness. Early warning signs of illness in shelter dogs include coughing, sneezing, lethargy, hair loss, diarrhea, and vomiting. If these or other signs of illness are noted, the dogs are treated, sometimes on site if the shelter has the capability, sometimes by a private veterinarian. You should receive a record of all treatments performed when you adopt your new dog.

Most shelter dogs are exposed to common, easily treatable contagious diseases such as intestinal parasites, fleas, and kennel cough. These dogs are usually treated while in the shelter, but because many dogs recover faster in the comfort of a good home, you may be asked to finish their medication.

Sometimes dogs are exposed to more serious infections, such as distemper or parvovirus. Keep in mind that dogs can get exposed to these viruses anywhere—in fact, most of the cases we see in our hospital are privately owned dogs who haven’t been anywhere near a shelter. Although it varies between shelters, all shelters have a quarantine or holding period during which these conditions usually manifest. However, they sometimes are not detected until after the dog has been adopted. For this reason, all existing dogs in the home should be vaccinated prior to bringing home a new shelter



other sources. First, the dogs must be spayed/neutered prior to adoption, which is known to prevent certain health problems. Second, many shelter dogs are hardy mixed-breeds with decreased chances of genetic problems (although, if you’re in love with a certain breed, 25% of shelter dogs are purebred). Third, shelter dogs have usually been treated or screened for common health problems and received vaccines and other care prior to adoption. Often, this care is worth hundreds of dollars. Of course, even if he or she came from a shelter with medical capabilities, it is always a good idea to take your

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dog, and the new dog’s health closely monitored.

Some shelter dogs have more serious chronic problems, such as neglect or abuse, or pre-existing conditions such as dental disease, infections, or traumatic injuries. These dogs truly have “medical special needs.” Such dogs are the minority of adoptable pets, and before you adopt one, you should be certain that you can provide the care the dog needs. Many people find adopting a special needs dog to be incredibly rewarding.

The shelter veterinary staff should tell you as much as they know about any existing medical conditions, and you should feel comfortable asking questions to determine whether you can handle any condition that the pet has.

There is always the chance of a pet having a medical condition that was not apparent while he or she was in the shelter. Some shelters will treat medical conditions within a set time frame after adoption (usually two weeks). However, adopting any pet is “for better or for worse” and you should be prepared to take responsibility for the inevitable medical needs that will occur over the lifetime of your dog.

There are several reasons why shelter dogs may actually be healthier in the long run than dogs from

new family member to the vet to get checked within the first few days after adoption!

You can find a new canine friend with an unknown background in the newspaper, online, or in a local parking lot, flea market, or pet store, but you may never know the whole story on their health history. Though there is no way to guarantee the health of any dog, our shelters work every day to know the health of their dogs, improve it, and share that information with their adopters. Your best bet at finding a healthy canine friend may be at one of our Bay Area shelters! 🐾



**Emilia Gordon, DVM** is Medical Director of the Berkeley-East Bay Humane Society (BEBHS). BEBHS is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to placing homeless animals with committed caretakers; to developing healthy relationships between pets and people through education, training and counseling; and to promoting the humane treatment of all animals. In addition to housing an animal shelter, BEBHS operates a veterinary hospital offering comprehensive, affordable care to the public with proceeds benefiting shelter animal medical care.

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dog is OK with these actions. Then, a few months or years go by, someone goes to pet your dog while she’s next to her bone and snap! The reason? The people didn’t keep practicing. My guidelines are to mess with your dog’s food at least once a week for her whole life, and take every chewy (rawhide, bully stick, Greenie) away from her at least once during her chew. This ensures you can safely take away items that are dangerous as well as enabling your pet to be around people in all circumstances, with no fear of her snapping at anyone while trying to protect her property. The key is to teach her that nothing is her property to begin with, so there are never any misunderstandings. A great way to work on this is to teach your dog to “drop it.” You can learn how to do this by watching the video called “Teaching ‘drop it’ ” on my website at [www.poochcoach.com/segment.html](http://www.poochcoach.com/segment.html)

To help you with your training, remember that requesting actions from your dog is like teaching a child basic responsibilities and politeness. Even a spoiled dog (mine certainly is!) can be polite and well-mannered. Teach your dog to be patient and give her consistent boundaries to live within and she will be happier and healthier for your efforts. Learning, growing and improving should be an ongoing pursuit for both you and your dog! 🐾



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