

## Veterinary Problems in Puppy Mill Dogs

Dogs in puppy mills often suffer from an array of painful and potentially life-shortening veterinary problems due to overcrowded, unsanitary conditions and the lack of proper oversight or veterinary care. Conditions common to puppy mills, such as the use of stacked, wire cages to house more animals than a given space should reasonably hold, as well as constant exposure to the feces and urine of other dogs, make it difficult for dogs to avoid exposure to common parasites and infectious diseases. In addition, a lack of regular, preventive veterinary care, clean food and water, basic cleaning and grooming, and careful daily observation by the operators may cause even minor injuries or infections to fester until they become severe. These disorders cause undue pain and suffering to the animals involved and often result in premature death.

### Examples:

- When 80 dogs were rescued in July 21, 2011 from a puppy mill in Hertford, N.C., a veterinarian with the local intake SPCA reported that almost 50% of the dogs were afflicted with parasites, 23% suffered from ear infections, 15% suffered from various eye disorders including KCS, a very painful dry-eye condition, and all the animals older than 18 months showed evidence of moderate to severe periodontal disease. One of the dogs had such severe dental disease that she required 32 dental extractions, while others had periodontal disease so severe that it led to bone resorption of the mandible (eroded jaw bone). Six dogs suffered from pyoderma (skin disease) secondary to urine-soaked, matted fur.
- When more than 100 dogs were removed from a puppy mill in Stuarts Draft, Va., in August 2009, findings from 200-page state veterinarian report indicated that out of 80 dogs examined, more than 60% of them suffered from a disorder serious enough to require emergency veterinary care, more than 80% suffered from parasites, almost 40% were underweight, more than 35% suffered from dehydration, and more than 40% suffered from eye disorders such as



**TOP:** Virginia's state veterinarian determined that this rescued puppy mill dog suffered from an ulcerated conjunctiva with a pigmented cornea suggestive of long-term eye disease; dental disease, dermatitis, and parasites and required emergency veterinary care. / VA State Veterinarian report, 2009

**BOTTOM:** Skin conditions caused by mites, fleas and secondary infections are common in puppy mill dogs due to overcrowding and lack of proper care. This Doberman's skin was so irritated that it would crack and bleed when he rubbed his face against the cage to relieve the itching. /The HSUS



conjunctivitis, ocular infections or KCS. Many of the severely underweight or ill dogs were also pregnant, affecting the survivability of their offspring.

- The long-term effects of the confinement and deprivation at a puppy mill can have psychological as well as physical manifestations, according research conducted by Dr. Frank McMillan, DVM, with James Serpell and Deborah Duffy of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. The study was reported in *USA Today* (Oct. 10, 2011) and is scheduled for publication in *Applied Animal Behavior Science*. The research encompassed more than 1100 former puppy-mill dogs who had been in their new homes an average of two years. The dogs were found to have significantly elevated levels of fears and phobias, compulsive and repetitive behaviors, and heightened sensitivity to being touched. Compared to "normal" pet dogs, the recovered puppy mill dogs had a six to eight times higher chance of scoring in the highest ranges for fear.

"This study gives us strong evidence that the dogs kept in these large-scale breeding facilities don't just suffer while they're confined there, but carry the emotional scars out with them for years, even when they're placed in loving homes," Dr. McMillan told *USA Today*.

## **Costs to Intake Shelters and other Nonprofits**

An internal study conducted by the Humane Society of the United States (The HSUS) in 2011 found that animal shelters and rescue groups that The HSUS worked with to help treat and place newly-rescued puppy mill dogs spent an average of \$259 for veterinary expenses per dog rescued (reimbursed by The HSUS). Details from that research include:

- A Houston, Texas animal shelter spent more than \$24,000 providing veterinary treatment for 220 dogs rescued from a breeding and hoarding case in January 2011. In addition, the shelter estimated it spent more than \$52,800 for the nine days of veterinary boarding and 30 days of sheltering care during the animals' stay at the shelter prior to placement, for a total cost of approximately \$76,800.
- A New Jersey animal rescue organization spent more than \$4,000 caring for just three critically ill puppy-mill survivors who required urgent inpatient intensive care after they were removed from a puppy mill in March 2010.
- A Virginia dog and cat rescue group that took in five animals relinquished by a puppy mill in January 2011 spent more than \$4,200 on the dogs' care, or an average of \$840 per dog. The care included one large mammary tumor removal and biopsy, several animals treated for eye disorders, and a total of 62 dental extractions among the five animals, including one dog who required more than 20 extractions.

## **Conclusion**

Vaccination programs alone can't prevent the array of veterinary problems prevalent in dogs at puppy mills. The health impacts of overcrowding, filthy conditions, and lack of basic oversight can be traced directly to the housing and husbandry conditions common in large-scale, commercial breeding operations. Wire floors injure paws, high ammonia levels lead to breathing problems, and the lack of sanitation results in pathogens that are very difficult to permanently eradicate. Caging set-ups designed to require the most minimal hands-on care possible often lead to treatable injuries or infections becoming severe or even deadly.

Stronger, clearer humane standards and improved oversight of large-scale commercial breeders are necessary to help prevent this suffering.