

# **THINKING ABOUT GETTING A GERMAN SHEPHERD?**

## **Resources**

German Shepherd Dog Club of America – [www.gsdca.org](http://www.gsdca.org)

German Shepherd Dog Club of Atlanta – [www.gsdatlanta.org](http://www.gsdatlanta.org)

Facebook: GSDC of Atlanta

Breeder Referral (has list of puppies and dogs available from club members) – Connie Irvine – 770-507-7408

German Shepherd Dog Rescue of Georgia – [www.gashepherd.org](http://www.gashepherd.org),  
[info@gashepherd.org](mailto:info@gashepherd.org)

Canine Pet Rescue - [www.caninepetrescue.com](http://www.caninepetrescue.com)

German Shepherd Rescue Association (National organization) –  
[www.agsra.com](http://www.agsra.com)

Orthopedic Foundation for Animals – [www.offa.org](http://www.offa.org)

Canine Health Information Center – [www.caninehealthinfo.org](http://www.caninehealthinfo.org)

Atlanta Kennel Club – [www.atlantakennelclub.org](http://www.atlantakennelclub.org)

American Kennel Club – [www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org) (There are other registries, but the AKC is the “gold standard.”)

American German Shepherd Dog Charitable Foundation (sponsors research on health problems of GSD’s) – [www.agsdcf.org](http://www.agsdcf.org)

## **What to Look for:**

A breeder or rescue group who/which ***will take back any German Shepherd Dog*** (GSD) the breeder has bred or the rescue group has placed, ***at any time in the dog’s life***, if you cannot keep him or her for any reason.

A breeder whose puppies are or can be registered with the American Kennel Club (this means that ***both the parents must be AKC-registered***). (Purebred rescued dogs of unknown pedigree, who are spayed or neutered, can get special AKC registrations which allow them to compete in AKC performance events.)

A breeder who ***performs health testing on the puppies’ parents*** (the breeder may have only the dam, but will have this information on the sire as well). If you have the complete registered name and breed of a dog, you can look that dog up on [www.offa.org](http://www.offa.org) to see what health tests it has had, and the results. The breeder should be willing to give you that information for both the sire and the dam, and/or to give you copies of the health certificates the

parents have earned (pups are too young to be tested for most health conditions).

A breeder who will ***give you the health records of any puppy you buy***, who ***uses a contract, provides a guarantee*** for the pups (that is, you can return the pup and get your money refunded within a specified time based on your veterinarian's evaluation), brings the puppies up inside a home rather than a kennel, and who ***socializes the pups*** to people from a very early age.

A breeder who ***shows his/her dogs in competitive events*** such as conformation, obedience, rally, tracking, agility, herding, Working Dog Sport, or participates in Search and Rescue, therapy dog work, or whose dog is a working Service Dog. The pups' pedigree should include dogs who have titles and/or certifications in one or more of these areas. Ask the breeder to go over the pedigree with you and to explain what the titles mean. The more dogs with titles the better! You can find lists of titles and what they mean at [www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org).

### **Why this Breeding? Why this Litter? Why Now?**

Look for a breeder who ***tries to breed puppies which meet the Standard for the German Shepherd Dog Breed***. You can find it on [www.gsdca.org](http://www.gsdca.org) and [www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org); everyone interested in German Shepherd Dogs should read it, as it addresses temperament as well as conformation and correct movement. Ask the breeder why s/he bred this particular dam to this particular sire – what was s/he hoping to get? All breeders should always be striving to improve the breed, and responsible bitch owners usually choose a male who can improve on their bitch's weaknesses, or who has a compatible pedigree to hers.

### **Health Issues:**

There is ***no such thing as a perfect dog*** in the German Shepherd Dog breed or in any other breed. However, there are a number of tests available which responsible breeders use to enhance the chances of the puppies' having as few problems as possible. The Canine Health Information Center, after obtaining input from the German Shepherd Dog Club of America, has listed three tests as essential for German Shepherd Dogs; those are evaluations of ***hips, elbows, and temperament*** (the latter is not a health issue, of course, but it is vital to the wellbeing of the breed). Optional CHIC tests include those

for *cardiac, thyroid, DM (degenerative myelopathy)* and *eyes*. Few breeders have all these tests done on all their dogs; hip and elbow tests are most common. The Orthopedic Foundation for Animals will give a preliminary hip or elbow status to a dog as young as one year; the dog must be two years old before he can be assigned a “permanent” hip or elbow rating. Elbows are either normal (passing) or not. Hips can be rated Excellent, Good, or Fair; any grade below that is not passing. As noted above, ***the breeder should show you the sire and dam’s certifications. The breeder should also give you at least a three-generation pedigree, which will note any champions, performance titles, and OFA certifications of the sire, dam, and ancestors.***

Unfortunately, there is no genetic test for propensity to *bloat*, which is a life-threatening condition that occurs in large-breed dogs when their stomachs swell and then twist, cutting off blood supply. Ask the breeder if there has been any bloat in their lines, and also to describe the signs of bloat and their recommendations to keep it from occurring. ***Symptoms may (but do not always) include restlessness, trying to vomit but being unable to do so, and a swollen, hard stomach.*** Once you get your dog or puppy, discuss this with your veterinarian as well, as bloat is the most common killer of German Shepherd Dogs. If you ever think your dog may be bloating, get him to the nearest emergency vet clinic immediately; only surgery can save the life of a dog who is bloating. Also ask the breeder if there has been any *DM (Degenerative Myelopathy)* in their lines and if the puppies have been tested for it. (This is an important DNA test that can be done on very young puppies.) DM is a neurological disease very similar to multiple sclerosis in people; there is no cure. This disease is quite prevalent in GSD’s as well as many other breeds. There is no pain involved, but the condition causes a gradual loss of mobility of the dog’s rear end and eventual death.

Ask the breeder to tell you about *“pano,”* as well. This is a common problem with young German Shepherd Dogs, and is sometimes called “shifting leg lameness.” Your vet should be familiar with it, and can help make the dog more comfortable; the good news is that affected GSD’s grow out of it, usually by age two.

Another problem which exists within the breed (as well as in other breeds) is ***poor digestive function***, including but not limited to exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (EPI), mega esophagus, and irritable bowel syndrome. Ask the breeder if s/he has had problems with any of these, and if so how s/he

handled them. Remember that just as there is no perfect dog, GSD or other breed, there is also no perfect breeder.

Ask the breeder how long the puppies' grandparents and great-grandparents lived, and what they died from, if they know. German Shepherd Dogs generally live to be 10 to 12 years old.

***If the breeder has never heard of bloat, DM, digestive disorders, or pano, or says that they “don't believe” in doing any health tests on the sire and dam of their puppies, run away politely but quickly!***

### **American-bred vs. German-bred:**

Although some fanciers would disagree, ***both American-bred and German-bred GSD's can be wonderful dogs.*** In general, because German-bred GSD's are required to have working titles prior to breeding, German-bred GSD's have higher play and prey drives than American-bred GSD's, but this is not always the case. Although all GSD's require a modicum of daily exercise, any GSD with a high play or prey drive will need more exercise than one who just wants to be a couch potato. The pedigree of your prospective pup should be evaluated on what is in the pedigree rather than whether the dog is American- or German-bred. Tell the breeder what type of personality you would prefer, and the breeder will be able to match you with the right pup, as dogs are “hard-wired” at birth, and it is possible to tell from a very early age what type of personality they will have, including play and prey drive and dominance. For most people, a “middle of the road” pup is the best bet.

### **Puppy vs. Adult Dog?**

Puppies are a lot of trouble, but they're awfully cute! Although all puppies should be crate-trained, a puppy cannot go 8-10 hours every day in a crate. So, if there is no one home in the daytime at your house, you will need to make arrangements to have someone come in to take the pup out at least once a day. ***Puppies need to be fed at least 3 times a day at the beginning, and they like to chew. Many people feel that GSD's should not be given the total run of the house until they are about 2 years old.*** However, if you get a puppy from a reputable breeder, and take it through appropriate positive-reinforcement training classes, then you can take legitimate pride in having “made” a wonderful adult. The ***effort you put into a puppy in the***

*first two years pays off for the rest of the dog's life.* GSD's are naturally clean (although they shed all the time, and require frequent brushing), and are very easy to crate- and house-train, if you follow a consistent and reasonable schedule. ***Every GSD puppy should go to "puppy kindergarten,"*** training classes geared for pups and which use positive reinforcement. Ask your breeder and your veterinarian about recommendations for reputable trainers.

Adult dogs, which can be adopted from reputable rescue groups or from reputable breeders who want a good pet home for an adult dog who is finished with his/her show career, have one great advantage: ***you can already see "what you're going to get."*** GSD's are capable of bonding with new owners, and sometimes ***an adult GSD from Rescue can be the "perfect dog" for a family that simply does not have the time to cope with a puppy.*** Reputable rescue groups will tell you everything they know about the dog, and will agree to take him or her back if placement with you does not work out. Expect to be grilled by them as though you were adopting a human child! As noted above, if you are interested in competing with your dog in performance events (obedience, agility, tracking, herding, etc.), if your purebred GSD is neutered or spayed, ***you can obtain a special registration (PAL) from AKC*** which will allow your dog to compete in those events.

### **Color, Coat, and Size in the German Shepherd Dog**

The Official Standard of the German Shepherd Dog, as published by the American Kennel Club, includes the following section on color: "The German Shepherd Dog varies in color, and most colors are permissible. ***Strong rich colors are preferred.*** Nose black. Pale, washed-out colors and blues or livers are serious faults. A white dog or a dog with a nose that is not predominantly black must be disqualified."

***Black and tan, usually with a "saddle" pattern and varying amounts of tan, from light to dark, is the most common GSD color, followed by sable and solid black.*** Although sable is thought of as a color, it is actually a pattern of coloring: each hair on the body of the dog is tipped in black. The background color may be any shade or color ranging from light tan to mahogany, or light grey to charcoal. Solid black is exactly that. ***Most GSD puppies are born very dark, and lighten up a great deal in the first few months, and then at a lesser rate as they get older.*** So, don't assume that a puppy will look the same in six months! Although white GSD's can be

registered with the AKC if their sire and dam were AKC-registered, and may compete in performance events, white is a disqualifying color for AKC conformation competition.

According to the Standard, the *ideal GSD has a double coat of medium length*. The top or outer coat is coarse, and the undercoat is almost down-like. The undercoat acts as an insulator against heat and cold, while the outer coat sheds water and dirt to “weatherproof” the dog. The “long-coated” shepherd is the product of a recessive gene. While the long coat in the past has not been desirable for the “show dog” (in conformation, because some long-coated GSD’s do not have undercoats), this has been changing in recent years. No hereditary problems have been associated with this gene. Some extra grooming is required to maintain the long coat.

Finally, despite ads you may see to the contrary, *bigger is not better*, in the German Shepherd Dog. The standard says that bitches (*females*) *should be from 22 to 24 inches tall at the withers* (where the neck attaches to the back); dogs (*males*) *should be from 24 to 26 inches tall at the withers*. Weight should be in proportion to size. The body of a GSD should give an impression of depth and solidity without bulkiness. GSD’s were bred to be tough, weatherproof herding dogs who could work all day without tiring, and GSD’s today benefit from being kept fit, lean, and ready to work.

### Where Not to Get a Dog:

- A *pet shop which sells puppies* (Places like PetsMart which hold adoption days for rescue groups are fine; they do not sell dogs themselves. Dogs in pet shops come from puppy mills, which house breeding dogs in deplorable conditions. Do not buy anything from such a store.)
- A rescue group which will not tell you how they obtained the dog, and any background they know about it.
- A breeder or rescue group which will not take the dog back if you feel you cannot keep it.
- A breeder who has a male and female GSD and is obviously breeding just to make money; this person will not compete with their dogs in any sport, and probably will not be able to answer the questions noted in this flyer.

## Who Should *Not* Get a German Shepherd Dog?

- People who have severe *allergies to dog hair/dander; GSD's are shedding machines.*
- People who intend to leave a dog outside all day, with no company.
- People who do not have an adequate fenced yard or exercise area; GSD's should never be chained.
- People who do not have the time or energy to provide daily exercise and play with a dog.
- People who are very "house proud" and do not like dog hair on their carpets and furniture.
- People who think all puppies are cute but can't handle large dogs with tails that swipe everything off coffee tables.
- People who are *not willing to take their dog to obedience classes, beginning with puppy kindergarten.*
- People who do not want a dog who is smarter than they are!
- People who do not have the resources to provide appropriate shelter, food, preventive and veterinary care for a dog who may live 10 – 14 years. *There is no shame in not getting a dog if you cannot afford one.*

## Who Should Get a German Shepherd Dog?

- Responsible people who are *willing to commit to their new family member for as long as the dog lives*, which could be from 10 to 14 years.
- People who *have the resources to care for a GSD for its entire life.*
- People who are *willing to train their new GSD to have good manners with other dogs and with people* (see the AKC's web site for information about the CGC, Canine Good Citizen, program – every GSD should be capable of obtaining this certification).
- People who like to decorate their home with beautiful dog hair.
- People who understand that, despite their size, *GSD's are house dogs*, not "outside" dogs; although a secure fenced-in yard or area is necessary, a GSD will not exercise himself if left alone, and will be miserable.
- People who are willing to provide regular, daily exercise for their new family member.

- If these points describe you, please attend a club meeting, go to a dog show or agility or obedience trial, and meet other people who love the *most versatile dog in the world!*