Transcript:

Special Needs of Brachycephalic Breeds

Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker, and today we are going to discuss the special needs of brachycephalic breeds.

A brachycephalic breed is a dog with a pushed-in face. A smashed nose breed, a lot of people call them. You may not have heard the word brachycephalic breed before but I am sure you have seen at least one of these breeds. The incredibly popular breeds are pug, Boston terrier, boxer, bulldog, Pekingese, and Shi Tzu. Himalayans and Persians are good examples of brachycephalic cats.

“Brachy” is a Greek word that means short and “cephalic” means head. So they are kind of short-headed, short-muzzled breeds. They are bred this way intentionally, needless to say. They have been bred for their lower jaw to be normal but for their upper jaw to be compressed. So all brachycephalic breeds have brachycephalic respiratory syndrome to varying degrees. What this means is that most brachycephalics do fine. But one particular group, the English bulldogs, tends to have really significant respiratory syndrome problems.

Physical Qualities of Dogs with Brachycephalic Respiratory Syndrome

Brachycephalic respiratory syndrome starts with the nostrils, which oftentimes are really tight in these particular breeds. They are scrolled really tightly and they are narrow and very small, so it’s hard to move air in through the nostrils.

Next, there is an elongated soft palate, so there is a big flap of skin on the back of their throat that causes a lot of the characteristic snorting and other respiratory sounds that you can hear in these particular breeds.

Oftentimes, the windpipe can be very narrow in some places, and this leads to a condition called tracheal stenosis (narrowing of the trachea). Because it is just genetically smaller, it can predispose animals to tracheal collapse. Unfortunately, this condition is a predisposing factor for higher risk anesthetic patients. If you have a brachycephalic dog or cat, make sure that your pet is cleared for anesthesia before a surgery in terms of making sure that respiration is sufficient.

Respiratory Distress

Because of the upper airway challenges of brachycephalic dogs, they cannot pant very efficiently. Needless to say, panting is how dogs cool down. So dogs do not sweat; they pant.
Because brachycephalic breeds are prime candidates for heat stroke, it is important that you recognize that respiratory distress can occur with these particular breeds more commonly when traveling by plane or, certainly, in hot automobiles than more so than other breeds of dogs.

You should know the normal sound that your dog or cat makes if you have a brachycephalic breed – normal for them is not normal for normal snouted dogs and cats. If you notice an increase or amplification of respiratory sounds, it is important that you take note of that. Brachycephalic syndrome can be a progressive condition, so you need to treat affected pets for tracheal collapse or other larynx problems at the onset rather than waiting until your dog develops significant respiratory distress.

Eye Problems

Brachycephalic pets also have their fair share of eye problems, unfortunately. The way that their heads are constructed means that even sometimes their eyes do not fit properly in their heads. The sockets are oftentimes shallow, and these make their eyes more pronounced. They kind of have a bug eye or bulgy eye appearance. Very cute, of course; makes them quite adorable.

However, a blow to the back of the head or any type of head trauma can dislodge an eye. These breeds are at extra high risk of having an eye pop out. Oftentimes, obviously, this can happen just from pulling too hard on a leash. So any type of head trauma can cause an eye to pop out. Obviously, you have to go to surgery immediately if that happens. Harnesses are a very good idea for brachycephalic breeds. I am not a big fan of anything around the neck, which can increase cerebral pressure and intraocular pressure.

Another common problem with the eyes because the sockets are so shallow is that sometimes the eyelids cannot effectively close over top of the eyes. This can result in corneal irritation and can lead to corneal damage. Many brachycephalic breeds have chronic corneal problems.

You can tell if your pet has this problem most easily by watching your brachycephalic breed sleep. When they are sleeping, if they are unable to close their eyes completely over their entire eye, you need to recognize that the eyelids are at risk of drying out. If the eyelids do not fit together, the cornea can dry out. Oftentimes, it can require surgical correction if the condition is severe enough.

At a minimum, if you notice that your dog or cat’s eyes are drying out, you can provide additional lubrication. At my clinic, we use saline eye gel really commonly to just help prevent eye irritation or corneal ulcers. Of course, it can also reduce the need for surgical correction if you are providing lubrication to your dog’s or cat’s eyes.
Eyelid problems can also be an issue if your pet seems to have constant watering or wetness around the eyes. This is incredibly common. It is, unfortunately, oftentimes more predisposed with brachycephalic breeds because they are tearing excessively and oftentimes you see a lot of wet moisture here on these particular breeds. So it could be that the eyelids are not fitting together, but it also could be that their lower lids are curling in. Sometimes upper lids can curl in, too. It is a condition called entropion.

Entropion or curling in of the lids can cause the eyelashes to rub against the cornea, which creates tremendous irritation. It is like having an eyelash in your eye all the time. It causes dogs or cats oftentimes to squint. A lot of times, this has to be corrected surgically.

Dental Problems

Another problem with brachycephalic breeds can also be teeth crowding. Oftentimes, brachycephalic dogs also have 42 teeth like every other breed of dog, but because their upper jaw is smashed in, all those teeth still have to fit in all that tiny little area and they can end up with a lot of odd angles – teeth coming in at strange angles, teeth overlapping – which can result in some gum problems, dental problems. Oftentimes, these are noted at a very early age.

If you have a flat-faced breed, it is important that you do home oral dental care as early as possible. For brachycephalic breeds, I recommend as early as eight weeks that you begin desensitizing their mouths so you can keep up with oral care. Needless to say, reducing the need for anesthesia for dental scaling is much better off by you avoiding that completely by disinfecting the mouth very early on.

Also remember that raw diets are a great way to help keep your pets’ mouths in good shape. By you feeding living, enzyme-rich foods, you are going to help reduce the amount of plaque and tartar accumulating in your brachycephalic’s mouths.

Other Health Risks

Another type of problem in this particular type of animal is that they oftentimes have facial fold infections. Because that upper jaw is smashed in, you can see a lot of redness or irritation; sometimes, even yeast growth in the facial folds. For my Boston terrier, I use witch hazel and just gently disinfect his facial folds on a couple-of-times-a-week basis.

Because of their broad heads, oftentimes litters of brachycephalic puppies can be difficult to whelp, which means that the mother has a difficult time delivering babies. Labor is oftentimes problematic, and a lot of these breeds require C-sections. Needless to say, there are risks in terms of pregnancy as well.

Final Reminders from Dr. Karen Becker
Of course, we, myself included, love our brachycephalic breeds. They are very intelligent and full of personality, and most devoted pet owners would tell you that they never considered owning any other breed once they have one. But needless to say, they do require a special set of knowledge and a little bit of extra skills when it comes to caring for them for them to be optimally healthy and have an excellent quality of life.