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What's Wrong With White Aussies?

by C.A. Sharp

An Australian Shepherd with a coat mostly snowy white sounds beautiful, but for decades all the breed standards have made having even so little as a third of the coat white a disqualification--meaning such dogs cannot be exhibited at dog shows and should not be bred. Why?

Aussies with mostly white coats can be produced when two merles are bred together. Merle is the patch-work coloring (black and grey or liver and buff) most associated with the breed. When a puppy inherits two copies of the gene for merle, it will usually have a lot of white in its coat. They are often referred to as "double merles." If these puppies only had lots of white, there wouldn't be a problem. Unfortunately, most of them are also blind, deaf, or both. This is the reason that the breed standards disqualify white dogs.

Life for a dog which is blind or deaf can be difficult. The defects cannot be cured or corrected by surgery or other treatments. People who own white Aussies must take extra care all through the dog's life—which can be 15 years or more—to make sure the dog cannot harm itself or anyone else because of its disabilities.

If someone offers to sell you a white Aussie, don't buy it. Producing double merles for sale is unethical and you are only encouraging these people to continue doing it. If you already have a white Aussie, have your vet check for defects in its vision and hearing, then take whatever precautions are necessary to give your dog appropriate protection and care.

Occasionally a puppy will be born that is not a double merle. If a mostly white puppy does not have two merle parents or the color patches on its coat are solid, not merle, it is probably fine, though a few of these dogs will be deaf in one or both ears.