



# West Highland white terriers

By Dr Hans Andersen



*Photo credit: Pure Animal Wellbeing.*

**Originally bred for hunting, the West Highland white terrier is a versatile breed whose cute appearance makes it a popular modern choice of pet.**

As with most terriers, West Highland white terriers were originally bred for hunting. They are closely related to Cairn terriers and one story has it that they were bred white so they could be easily distinguished from the foxes they were hunting and so less likely to be accidentally shot.

Their strong jaws, sturdy build and plucky temperament all match this hunting heritage.

Their cute appearance is part of their modern appeal, as is their minimally shedding hair coat. Although this means they need to be clipped or 'stripped' regularly, it does avoid clingy white hair getting into carpets and clothing.

Westies are versatile, fitting into active and sedentary lifestyles. This makes them very appropriate for urban settings and popular with older people who appreciate their loyal companionship and very alert watchdog qualities.

They generally enjoy robust good health with a life expectancy of 14 years. However the breed is susceptible to quite a range of inherited disorders and it is important to be aware of these and to choose pups from a registered breeder who keeps track of their litters and is actively screening to avoid these diseases.

The inherited disorders can be grouped into inflammatory disorders, auto-

immune diseases, developmental disorders and cancer.

Atopic dermatitis is characterised by very itchy skin triggered by hypersensitivity to allergens such as pollens and housemite dust that are commonly inhaled, but may be ingested or absorbed through the skin. It is the most common allergic skin disease of dogs, but westies have about twice the incidence of the general dog population.

*Paws for thought - issue 42* has an excellent overview of atopic dermatitis by Duncan Graham. An inherited dysfunction in the way inflammatory chemicals are processed is one of the causes of this disease.

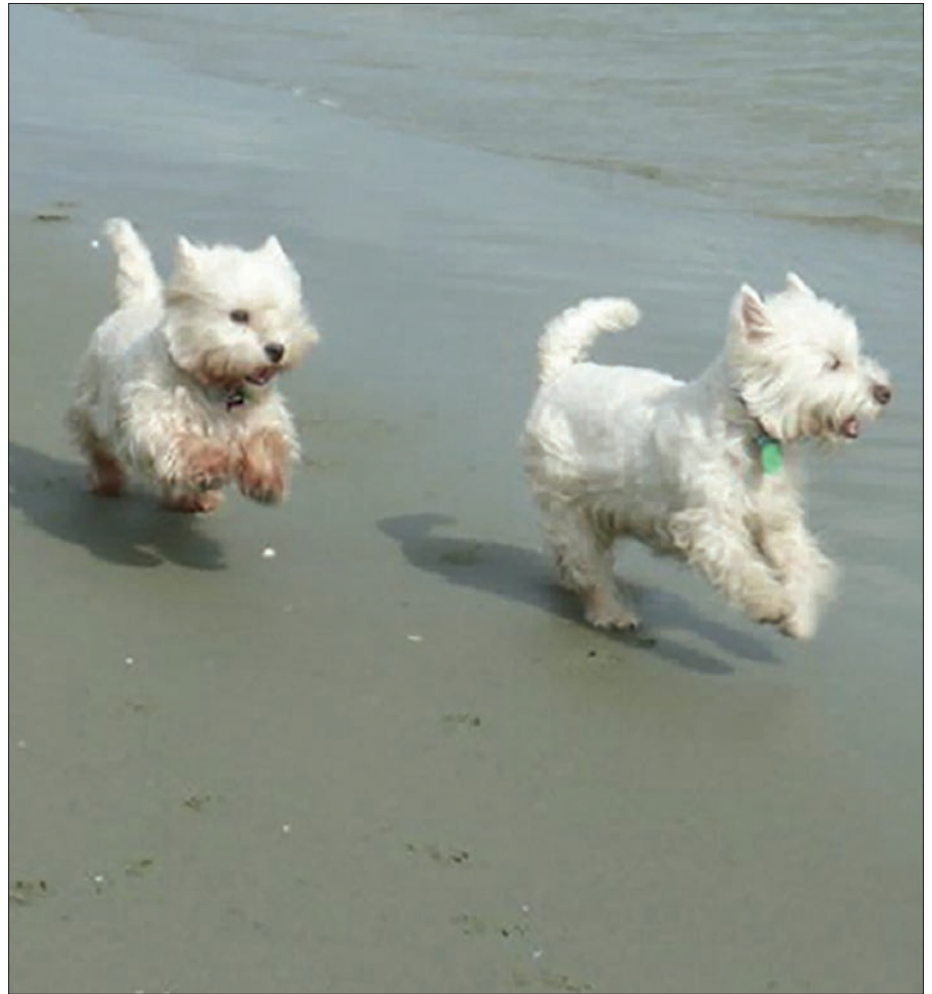
Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) also has a strong allergic component, and the increased incidence in some dog breeds suggests inherited disorders of immune function. In *Paws for thought* - issue 41, the article on IBD focuses on the disease in cats, but most is also relevant to dogs.

Chronic hepatitis has a higher incidence in West Highland whites mainly, it seems, as a result of an abnormally heightened inflammatory response in the liver, as well as a genetic defect that allows the build up of toxic levels of copper in the liver.

Pulmonary fibrosis is a rare but serious inflammatory condition of the collagen support structures of lung tissue. This thickening causes resistance to airflow and hence difficult breathing. It also causes resistance to blood flow through the lungs, making the right side of the heart work harder and eventually leading to right-sided heart failure. It is mainly seen in West Highland whites and some other terriers and tends to occur in middle and older age dogs.

White shaker disease is a nerve condition characterised by whole body tremor. There is a sudden onset in young dogs of 6 - 36 months. The tremors get worse with excitement or stress. These dogs have a mild inflammation of the brain and particularly the cerebellum, which often responds to corticosteroids. It is seen in white breeds of dogs including westies, Maltese, Bichons and Samoyeds, but the genetic connection with coat colour and this abnormal inflammation is not yet clear.

Auto-immune disorders occur when the body's immune system starts to target some body organ or tissue as if it were an enemy. Three diseases to which westies are predisposed have this basis, suggesting that the genetic abnormality may be in the regulation of the immune system.



*Westies Tweedy and Bobby enjoying the beach. Photo credit: Anna Johnson.*

Kerato-conjunctivitis sicca (KCS) is commonly known as 'dry eye'. It is quite a common disorder, with reported incidences ranging from 1 - 8 percent of all dogs.

These dogs' immune systems have targeted their tear producing glands. Without the normal lubrication their eyes become dry, irritated and susceptible to chronic infections and corneal damage. It usually responds well to treatment with cyclosporin eye drops, especially if diagnosed at an early stage.

Type 1 Diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes) and Addison's disease are both caused by hormone deficiencies, which are the result of autoimmune disease. Neither disease is common, but westies are over-represented amongst affected dogs.

### Inherited diseases

- Atopic dermatitis
- Patellar luxation
- Hip dysplasia
- Legg-Calve-Perthes disease
- Juvenile cataracts
- White shaker disease
- Pulmonary fibrosis
- Kerato-conjunctivitis sicca
- Diabetes mellitus
- Addison's disease
- Transitional cell carcinoma
- Craniomandibular osteopathy

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The developmental disorders include three causes of hindlimb lameness. The most common in westies is luxating patellae – kneecaps that slip out of place. The kneecaps usually slide up and down in a groove at the bottom of the thigh bone. Selecting for short dogs with bowed legs automatically selects for a tendency for the kneecaps to slip out of place, and westies share this tendency with many other short-legged dogs. Avoidance is best, but early detection allows correction with the least surgery.

Hip dysplasia is normally thought of as a problem of larger breed dogs (see *Paws for thought - issue 41*) but occurs in small breeds too, including westies.

Legg-Calve-Perthes disease is also a disease of the hip joint, but is almost exclusively found in toy and small breeds of dogs. It occurs between 4–11 months during their most rapid bone growth. The blood supply to the ball part of the hip joint, the femoral head, is damaged by trauma and without adequate blood the bone dies and the femoral head collapses. Surgical treatment is very successful.

Westies have the highest breed incidence of a very rare bone development problem of the head and jaw called cranial mandibular osteopathy. Because this disease is dramatic, occurs in young dogs, and has a clear mode of inheritance, responsible breeding has seen it largely eliminated.

One form of cancer has a markedly higher incidence in terriers of Scottish origin. This is transitional cell carcinoma, a cancer of the bladder lining. Scottish terriers (Scotties) have the highest risk but westies and Cairns also have an increased risk. The signs are difficulty peeing, more frequent peeing, bloody or smelly urine.

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## Wellness Plan for Life



### 2 - 3 months

Vaccination against distemper, hepatitis and parvovirus and, depending on risk factors, kennel cough and leptospirosis. Puppy Preschool, worming, flea control, nutritional advice, microchipping. Particular attention will be paid to the alignment of the kneecaps. Early detection and treatment gives the best results.

### 4 - 6 months

Further behavioural training classes (these are terriers!), vet check to monitor normal teething, jaw and physical development. De-sexing may happen now. Preanaesthetic screening tests are recommended. If your dog is being considered for breeding, PennHip x-rays should be done.

### 10 - 12 months

Vet check with a focus on checking normal physical development; transition to an adult diet formula and move to a more extensive exercise regime.

### 15 - 16 months

Vaccination boosters, physical exam, dental health.

### 2 - 7 years

Annual health checks. Blood tests to screen for liver disease. Booster vaccinations depending on risk.

### 7 - 11 years

Six-monthly health checks. These will include blood and urine screening tests, and updating the tumour mapping of any benign growths previously mapped, so new masses are not missed. The heart will be monitored. Screening chest x-rays and abdominal ultrasound are worthwhile. A senior formula, or a prescription diet to deal with specific diseases found by tests should be fed.

### 12+ years

As before, but now include assessments for Dogzheimers (see PAWS 37)