

Health Testing of the Great Swiss Mountain Dog

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I have been asked to write an article as the GSMD club's Breed Health Co-ordinator. The GSMD club is endeavouring to monitor any health issues that may arise within our breed. With such a new breed it is imperative that owners and breeders notify myself, as BHC, of any health issues that come to light. Only by keeping up to date records will breeders know what they are producing. However it is vital that any information is shared amongst breeders to enable us all to evaluate the breed as a whole in the hope of maintaining the future health of the breed here in the UK.

At present anyone wishing to breed their GSMD is advised to have health tests done beforehand. It is hoped all reputable breeders will put breeding restrictions in place on the registration certificates of all their puppies, thus not allowing any breeding to take place unless all the necessary health criteria's have been carried out first. With such a small gene pool any minor condition may be allowed to breed but only with breeding partners who do not share the same condition. Hence the importance of sharing information.

The first of these health tests is usually an eye test so I will start here. You will need to find an eye specialist in your area. You can find a list of BVA eye specialists on the internet or ask your own vet. The cost of an eye test is normally around £55 per dog with discounts if more than one dog is tested at a time. Many dog shows and clubs organise eye testing which is often cheaper than a single eye test. Ask around locally for any being held near you. Dogs should ideally be tested at around 16 months of age and then at least once every two to three years until the age of 7. A clear eye test one year can sometimes produce an affected eye test in subsequent years.

During an eye test the examiner will be looking for congenital eye conditions such as Distichiasis, Entropion and Cataracts. There are many eye conditions that can affect dogs and some breeds seem to be more affected than others. At present in the GSMD's there are no notifiable* eye conditions. Further down the line if the club finds an eye condition continually cropping up the KC will be notified and this will then become a notifiable condition which will be published in the KC Journal. It will then be advisable not to breed from any dog or bitch with the specified condition. Below I have mentioned the ones more likely to affect our breed.

There has been an incident of GPRA (Generalised Progressive Retinal Atrophy) in one litter born in the UK which is very rare in GSMD's, in fact I believe, it has never been heard of in the breed before. A dog with this condition eventually loses its eye sight. None of this litter will be bred from in an effort to contain this disease.

A few UK Swissies have been found to have Distichiasis (extra eyelashes). If the dog is in discomfort i.e. sore, runny eyes, the affected eyelashes can be surgically removed. This is a fairly straightforward operation with a good success rate. A dog/bitch with a few extra eyelashes could still be bred from but it would be advisable to only mate with a free dog/bitch to reduce the chance of passing the condition on.

So far I have not heard of any UK dog with Entropion. This is where the rim of the eyelashes turn into the eye which often causes ulcers and again can be rectified with surgery.

There are many forms of Cataracts. Puppies can be born with Cataracts but most Cataracts develop from the age of 1 year upwards. So far in the UK I have heard of 2 cases of PPS cataracts (Posterior Polar Subcapsular). These are very small, normally non progressive, cataracts which are not normally considered to be serious. However one affected dog later developed Bilateral Developing Cataracts which are a lot more serious so any dog with these cataracts will need yearly monitoring for any developments.

Some older dogs, age 6 years and over, will develop Senile Cataracts but due to the relatively short lifespan (approx 10 years) of the GSMD these do not normally cause a serious problem. Senile Cataracts are more serious in long lived breeds as eventually they will lose their eyesight. There is an operation available to remove the cataracts and although it is costly it is very effective. Occasionally the eye examination will reveal trauma which can be in many forms from a scratch on the lens to a detached retina.

If anyone has any comments or feedback on any of the above or any other eye issues please contact me.

*meaning if the vet finds the condition he has to report it to the kennel club and the BVA.