

The Great Dane

Dogs resembling Great Danes have been pictured for at least 1000 years, but the modern Great Dane was developed over the last two hundred years, primarily in Germany. These dogs were used for guarding property and for hunting big game, primarily wild boar in central Europe, and both sighthounds and mastiff-type dogs are part of their ancestry. The work for which they were meant required size, strength, aggression and tenacity.

Since Danes were introduced into this country in the late nineteenth century, breeders have worked hard and largely successfully to eliminate aggression from the Dane character, and for the most part Danes deserve their reputation as “gentle giants”. They remain working dogs, loving and loyal companions and serious guardians of their homes. Great Danes are in general not “one-man” dogs, but can be characterized as “one-family” dogs. Most Danes will make a clear distinction between their own people—family and friends—and everyone else, and will be friendly but reserved with strangers.

Great Danes are big, beautiful dogs, very much people-oriented, but the prospective owner should be aware of the possible difficulties of sharing his or her life with a Dane. A Great Dane gets very large very fast—there is no such thing as a miniature Dane—but in spite of it’s size will remain a puppy until it is two years old or more. Danes tend to housetrain easily, but when they have an accident, it is a major accident. A Dane puppy has a large mouth and a strong jaw, and does not require much time to reduce a shoe or a table leg or a sofa to rubbish if not watched. A Dane will eat a lot when growing, but if it eats too much and grows too fast can be subject to potentially-serious growth disorders. A Dane puppy weighing 100 pounds will have no clue that his owner’s child—or indeed, his owner—might object to being trampled, knocked down, or roughhoused.

And in spite of their size and strength, Danes are housedogs. They want to be with their people under any circumstances, but are particularly unsuited to living outside in a climate like ours in Minnesota. Most Dane owners are prepared to deal with these sorts of issues because they find any difficulties are out-weighed by the pleasure of sharing their lives with these dogs. There are people who are less adaptable, however, and anyone considering Dane ownership should confront these issues before looking for a puppy.

These are some of the most commonly-asked questions about Great Danes.

How big do they get?

As specified in the Great Dane standard, the minimum height for a male Dane is 30 inches at the shoulder; for a female, 28 inches. In practice, most Danes achieve these heights by 6 or 7 months old. An average male Dane is probably 35 or 36 inches tall at the shoulder; an average female; 32 or 33 inches. Many are taller. An average male Dane might weigh 160 pounds; a female, 120.

How long do they keep growing?

Danes usually have their height by 19 months old. Some males may take longer to reach their full height. They will continue to “body out” (develop breadth of body and depth of chest) for some time after that. It is not unusual for a male Dane to be 3 to 4 years old before he is physically mature.

How long do they live?

Like most giant-breed dogs, Danes are not especially long-lived. The average lifespan is generally given as 7-10 years. Longevity varies in different bloodlines.

How much do they eat?

At the height of the growth period, an average Dane puppy might eat 10-12 cups of a premium dog food daily. Some may eat more than that. Once they are mature, they will eat substantially less.

Do Great Danes need a lot of exercise?

A Great Dane is not the sort of dog that must have a two-mile run every day to be happy. With occasional outbursts of energy, a Great Dane can be happy as a couch potato. Of course, a Dane should be provided with the opportunity for some sort of exercise and a fenced yard is highly recommended. Under no circumstances, however, should a Dane puppy be forced into an exercise regimen as this can be very damaging to developing bones. Until a Dane is 2 years old, excessive exercise should be avoided.

Are Danes good with children?

As with any other breed of dog, this largely depends on how the Dane is raised. Danes brought up with children are usually very tolerant of them, provided that the children have not been allowed to tease them.

A Dane that has not been raised with children might have problems with very young ones. In any case, parents should realize that babies and toddlers should never be taught to respect the dog as a living creature that should not be treated as a stuffed toy.

Parents should also remember that a Dane puppy will be big and strong even at 5 or 6 months old, and will not understand that young children are too small to play rough games. Dane puppies can and do grow up with very young children, but parents must be sure to supervise all interactions to be sure that no one gets hurt.

What sort of health problems do Danes have?

If Dane puppies are overfed or over-exercised during the growth period, they can develop various bone growth disorders, some of which may be a serious health threat. Like many breeds, Danes are subject to hip dysplasia. While this disease has both genetic and environmental components, it is important to be sure that both parents of a Dane puppy have been X-rayed and cleared of dysplasia. The standard certification is provided by the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (OFA), and can be done any time after a dog is 2 years old. Great Danes may develop thyroid insufficiency and require treatment with thyroid hormone. Danes may develop dilated cardiomyopathy, an enlargement of the heart muscle that leads to heart failure, and in some cases this disease has a genetic basis. Danes may also develop bloat, a life-threatening build-up of gases in the stomach that may or may not be accompanied by twisting of the stomach and intestine. The causes of bloat, which occurs in many breeds of deep-chested dogs, are not clearly understood. Immediate veterinary intervention, possibly involving surgery, is required to deal with this condition.

Are Danes easy to train?

Although Danes were bred to work independently, they are very trainable and very happy to please their owners. However, the same general principles apply to training Danes as to any other animal: the owner must be persistent and consistent to achieve results, especially with a puppy. The owner should also bear in mind that training should start early with a Dane, while it is still relatively easy to manipulate the dog physically. Attempting to place an adult Dane into a "down" position is apt to lead to both frustration and exhaustion on the part of the owner.

Does it cost a lot to keep a Dane?

Unfortunately, yes. A Great Dane is as big as an adult person, and in some respects can cost as much to maintain. Veterinary care is a specific example. When giving heartworm preventative, for instance, an adult Dane will require two of the largest-size tablets per dose. Double the cost of treatment for even a dog the size of a Labrador Retriever. If a Dane needs antibiotics, he will need as much as an adult person would need. If a Dane needs surgery, even a simple spay or neuter is likely to cost more than it would for a smaller dog. The prospective Dane owner should be aware of the potential for serious expenses before choosing a Dane.

Most Dane owners feel that the pleasure of sharing their lives with Danes greatly outweigh any difficulties that may arise from owning such a large animal. They are prepared to fence their yard, drive a large vehicle, store their breakables in cupboards, keep food off the kitchen counter and cope with chewed furniture through puppyhood. Sadly, however, the main reason that Danes are brought to animal shelter is because the owner "didn't think it would get so big". Or the owner neglected to train a Dane puppy and when it became eighteen months old and weighed 150 pounds, "it was too much to handle and we didn't have time for it".

The members of the Heart of Minnesota Great Dane Club would be the first to vouch for the fun of living with a Dane, but would also urge any potential owners to consider well how a Dane puppy will grow before deciding to bring one home. Once someone is prepared to make an informed commitment to a Dane, however, he or she can be assured that they will be sharing their life with a very special companion.

If you are interested in learning more about the Great Dane you may call a Heart of Minnesota GDC member - President - Kristen Kenney - 612-751-3443 - Rescue Coordinator - Diane Levin - 952-469-2830 or Membership Chairperson - Mary Lee Williams - 218-290-0984. Please visit our website for other information at: www.hmgdc.org/

