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APRIL 20, 2011, 3:52 PM ET

The Disease Demographics of Doggy Death



Don't look at me — I'm a mutt.

A [large new study delves into the association between the breed of a dog and its cause of death](#), paving the way for future research into the genetic causes of the same diseases that plague humans.

Some associations between certain breeds and fatal illnesses have been known for a while, as the [WSJ's Melinda Beck wrote last year](#). Golden retrievers, for example, have high rates of cancer, while a higher-than-average percentage of dachshunds die from neurological diseases. And it's a truism that small dogs live longer than large ones.

But the new study relies on data covering 74,556 dogs whose deaths were recorded between 1984 and 2004, and is more comprehensive in the breeds and diseases it covers, study co-author Kate Creevy, an assistant professor in the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine, tells the Health Blog. (One of the caveats is that these deaths all occurred at veterinary teaching hospitals, which may see animals with more complicated diseases than occur in the general dog population.)

Analyzing such a large dataset turned up some new findings — 16% of fox terriers die from heart disease, and 47% of rare Bouviers des Flandres die from

cancer — and solidified others. And it lays the groundwork for further studies looking at the genetic basis of diseases in dogs, says Creevy. (The [dog genome](#) has already been sequenced.)

There are a lot of interesting questions for researchers to pursue. Why do small dogs tend to live longer than large ones, for example, even though in the rest of the animal kingdom size is generally tied to longevity? (Think elephants and mice.) Creevy says it's not clear whether smaller dogs are somehow protected by genetic factors from the aging process, or whether that process is somehow accelerated in larger dogs.

And do larger dogs usually avoid death from neurological or endocrine diseases because they have some kind of protection against them, or because musculo-skeletal diseases and cancer kill them before those other diseases can set in? (To add to the confusion, other research beyond the scope of this study has found that while smaller breeds tend to live longer than larger ones, within a breed, the larger animals outlive the smaller ones.)

Research into the ties between genetics and disease has implications for humans, who get many of the same illnesses as do dogs. Another thing dogs and people have in common: preventive care is almost always better than treating serious conditions or diseases once they've appeared, says Creevy. That means regular exercise and [avoiding obesity](#) are as important for your pooch as they are for you.

The study is published in the Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine.

Photo: Katherine Hobson