

Don't **buy dogs online**. Shopping via the internet is quick and convenient. But it is **NOT** the responsible way to choose an animal companion.

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How much is that doggie in the window? In this day and age when almost everything we use or want can be had online, the window we're talking about here is not a window in a pet shop but the screen on your computer. The American Pet Product Manufacturers Association estimates that 150,000 to 200,000 puppies were bought online last year by American families.

Convenience is the main reason people search online for the perfect puppy. It's a fun and easy way to see many different kinds of puppies and dogs at once. But buyer beware: Many canines have arrived sick, chronically ill or injured during transit. Often, the good-tempered dog you were promised turns out to be anything but the dog of your dreams. Some people have even been the victims of online fraud in which no dog arrives at all (after sending a lot of money to the online breeder). Before you buy this special family member online, know the facts.

The Adorable Factor

You may not even intend to adopt a puppy at the time, but you go online to see what's there. Then, before you know it, you lose all track of time by clicking through photo galleries of adorable puppies or dogs. Accompanying the photos are positive descriptions of behavioral habits and temperaments. "This cutie is great with kids," lures many shoppers in--even those buyers who would otherwise exercise caution in buying major purchases. And a dog is major.

"In the Northeast we have a shortage of puppies six months and younger," says Carmine DiCenso, manager of Animal Care and Adoption at the Massachusetts SPCA's Cape Cod shelter in Centerville, Massachusetts. "That may be why many people in this area go online to find a puppy. But it's not the best idea."

The cuteness factor is also at play in pet shops that rely on impulsive buyers. But as many people know--or unfortunately find out--being cute has very little to do with a dog's health, family health history or the conditions under which he was raised.

"The biggest disadvantage of buying online is that you don't get to meet the puppy face-to-face," says DiCenso. "A photo doesn't provide you with that bond, which is the first step to making a good match between you and your dog."

In fact, if you insist on buying a dog online, experts advise you to look up the breeder before you look at an available pup. Make sure the breeder knows about the particular diseases your dog could develop--and does not over-breed his dogs. Once you see that cute face staring back at you from the screen, you may be so hooked that you bypass important factors that might influence your pet's health.

The Risks You Take

The biggest risks you take are that your online dog won't be healthy or a good personality match for your family.

First, you must consider the dog's health before he or she even arrives. If you haven't seen the dog or the conditions under which he was raised, you can't be sure if he is free from disease. "Keep in mind that there are regional viruses," says DiCenso. "You could get a dog from the South who has a disease that's not common in the Northeast. Not only could the disease take time to diagnose and treat, but it also might put your other animals at home at

risk."

Transporting a dog bought online can be a problem. "Many dogs are transported by truck in non-weatherized conditions," says DiCenso. "They can either freeze or dangerously overheat if the temperature isn't controlled." When flying, dogs and pups are usually placed in cargo--another place where conditions are less than ideal for an animal.

The Best Options for Adoption

There are definite advantages to adopting a dog from a shelter. "We make sure that our dogs are free from disease and fully inoculated," says DiCenso. "We also save you money by neutering any dogs we adopt out of the shelter."

By far, the most important thing the shelter does is match up families with the appropriate dog for their lifestyle. Says DiCenso, "You may think you want a small dog like a Jack Russell, but you may not realize this is a very high-energy dog. We will help you select a calmer, quieter dog if that would work out better for you."

If you want a specific breed, you can almost always find a rescue group for that breed in your state, says DiCenso. For example, if you are looking for a Labrador retriever, just type into your browser "Lab New York rescue." Another good source is Petfinder.com.

Clothes, computers and books may be great to buy online. But when it comes to puppies and dogs, person-to-canine contact is the best bet for you and your new family member."