

Homeowners insurance bites dogs that bite

By [Heather Larson](#) • Bankrate.com

Thinking about getting a dog? Some breeds can cancel an insurance deal. Most insurance carriers don't have issues covering responsible pet owners.

During a pre-screening interview for homeowners insurance, Michael Richbourg of Atlanta was asked if he owned any dogs. He said he had two mixed breeds. He wasn't sure what kind, but one appeared to be mostly schipperke (pronounced, skipper-kee).

Hearing the breed, the agent quietly replied that he was unable to process Richbourg's application further.

The American Kennel Club describes a schipperke as an agile, active watchdog, curious and reserved with strangers. But [Yourpurebredpuppy.com](#), a dog-breed information website, says they can become bored and express themselves by barking and destructive chewing.

Whichever description is correct, Richbourg appeared to be rejected because the insurer had blacklisted the small schipperke as a liability.

Where are insurance companies getting their lists of what they perceive to be "aggressive" dogs? Without knowing, it's difficult for home- and dog owners to discern which breeds are acceptable and which aren't.

As it turns out, there's no standard list insurance companies follow, but dogs can factor in when an insurer is reviewing your new customer application. And it's not just the breeds typically thought of as aggressive, such as pit bulls, Rottweilers, chow chows, Doberman pinschers and German shepherds.

"Insurance companies go by the average number of bites reported by a certain breed," says Ashley Hunter, owner and president of HM Risk Group, an insurance and risk management brokerage in Austin, Texas.

The Humane Society of the United States reports that the bite list changes from year to year and from one area of the country to another, depending on the popularity of the breed. Just a few years ago, the Doberman was the breed to fear. Now, pit bulls and Rottweilers rule, and the Presa Canario -- a breed few people had heard of in 2001 -- is sought by those wanting a "killer dog."

"In Lewis and Clark's day, it was the Newfoundland because that was the popular breed," says Ledy Van Kavage, senior legislative analyst for Best Friends Animal Society, a pet sanctuary and adoption network in Kanab, Utah. "Dogs, like people, are individuals and should be judged that way."

PEMCO Insurance, based in Seattle, underwrites each risk individually. Breed is only one factor. It also considers socialization and gender, whether the dog has been spayed or neutered, how the dog is confined and the owner's claims history.

The Journal of Applied Animal Behavior has reported that dachshunds, Chihuahuas and Jack Russell terriers are the most likely to bite. Another study by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society put Labradors and golden retrievers in the high-risk category.

"The real problem is that there is so much conflicting information (about aggressive breeds), that you don't know what to believe," says Donna Popow, senior director of knowledge resources for The Institutes, a nonprofit offering insurance education in Malvern, Pa. "Any dog will bite, given the right set of circumstances."

But that doesn't mean homeowners with dogs should be denied insurance. "This is a knee-jerk reaction caused by public hysteria," Van Kavage says.

The latest statistics from the Insurance Information Institute, an industry association in New York, show that the average cost of a dog-bite claim nationwide was \$26,166 in 2010, up 5.3 percent from 2009. In addition, dog bites account for one-third of all homeowner's claims.

Thinking about getting a dog?

Popow recommends you consider the holistic risks of bringing a dog into your home. It's much like being the parent of a teenager who is now able to drive. You need to explore ways to manage the risk of your teen's exposure to driving. You will give the teenager instructions, ride along with them for a while and ensure they get lots of driving practice.

"That same process applies to bringing a new dog into the home," says Popow. "You need to prepare ahead of time."

Research the best type of dog for your family and home environment by talking to breeders, veterinarians and dog trainers, Popow says. If you're interested in rescuing a dog, get that same kind of information from a breed rescue organization or your local humane society. Some dogs aren't good with small children, some aren't good with cats and some don't do well with other dogs.

Document your research for insurance purposes. Your insurance company may or may not use your documentation when underwriting you. But even if they don't, you'll know you've done everything you could to choose the best dog for your family and your insurance company.

Find out how much exercise the dog will need and decide if you can supply it. Determine how much training you're willing to provide. The American Kennel Club offers a training course called Canine Good Citizen, or CGC. If your dog completes the course and passes the CGC test, some insurance companies such as Nationwide Insurance will insure your home even if your dog is one of the breeds or a breed mix that previously prohibited owners from qualifying for insurance, according to the National Animal Interest Alliance in Portland, Ore.

And think about having your dog spayed or neutered. According to the National Canine Research Council, 88 percent of the dogs involved in fatal attacks in 2010 had not been spayed or neutered.

To tell or not to tell

If you own one of the dogs that might be deemed aggressively your homeowners insurance company, should you let them know? Hunter says, "Yes."

"Insurance companies have misrepresentation in their coverage, and if you don't reveal that you have one of the 'questionable' dogs and you file a claim, they may not pay anything," Hunter says.

Before telling your insurance company that you have what they may consider an aggressive dog, Van Kavage, of the Best Friends Animal Society, suggests you have some coverage lined up with another insurance company. Insurance companies differ on breeds they deem aggressive and some go by which breeds in your state have bitten the most.

Van Kavage also cautions that when you own a mixed-breed dog, don't offer your insurance company a guess on what the predominant breed in the mix is. "It's impossible to guess correctly what the breed is unless you have a DNA test done," Van Kavage says.

You can usually find an insurance company that doesn't discriminate by dog breed and will insure you, risk broker Hunter says. But if you can't, Hunter recommends an umbrella policy that extends your insurance policy beyond your traditional coverage and includes your dog.

"Certain insurance carriers like State Farm and Farmers don't discriminate," says Van Kavage. "So shop around, but don't get rid of the animal."

The insurance carriers that do discriminate by breed are the smaller companies that are nervous about the liability and the bad press that comes from a dog-bite case, Hunter says. "Think outside the box when it comes to insurance carriers. Look for an independent agent that is more dog-friendly and doesn't tend to discriminate."

For the most part, the large insurance carriers don't have issues covering responsible pet owners, but the controversy rages on between the smaller companies and dog lovers.

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