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## What Kind of Dog Is a Labrador Retriever?

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### What is a Labrador Retriever?

The Labrador Retriever is a medium-size (weight 55 to 80 pounds, height 21½ to 24½ inches) dog characterized by a dense, water-resistant coat, a thick otter tail and a clean-cut, broad head with a friendly facial expression. A sporting breed, Labrador Retrievers are active, athletic dogs who need regular exercise for optimal mental and physical health. These people-oriented dogs also require substantial amounts of human companionship. Labs may be black, yellow or chocolate brown. Labs have easy-care coats but do shed seasonally. Labs have webbed feet for swimming.

### What is an otter tail?

An otter tail is thick at the base (where it connects to the body) and gradually tapers to the tip. The otter tail—one of the distinctive features of the Labrador Retriever—is described in great detail in the breed standard (the official description of the ideal Lab). It can also be a source of great consternation to Lab owners, as an exuberantly wagged otter tail can clear a coffee table in a matter of seconds.

### What is a retriever?

A retriever is a dog who brings back game birds that a hunter has killed. The job is more complicated than it sounds. Let's take a look at what Tucker, a five-year-old Lab, has to do when he hunts with Dale, his owner. First, Tucker watches as Dale shoots so he can see where the bird falls. Next, he waits until Dale tells him to retrieve the bird. Tucker then has to find the bird, which may involve navigating through rough terrain or water. If Tucker saw the bird fall, he probably won't have much difficulty finding it. If he didn't see the bird fall—or for some other reason cannot find it—he'll have to rely on signals from Dale to locate the bird. Tucker must then bring the bird back without damaging it. The soft mouth of a retriever (his ability—and propensity—to carry something in his mouth without mangling it) is an important quality for his success as a hunter. Tucker must surrender the bird to Dale upon command.

The Lab is just one type of retriever. The American Kennel Club (AKC) also recognizes five other retriever breeds: Flat-Coated Retrievers,

Curly-Coated Retrievers, Chesapeake Bay Retrievers, Golden Retrievers and Scotia Duck-Tolling Retrievers. Most of the spaniels also retrieve game, as do Standard Poodles. Worldwide, there are many other retriever breeds that are not recognized by the AKC.

## Are there differences between hunting Labs and show Labs?

Yes. Although all Labs share a hunting heritage, not every modern-day Lab is a hunter. In fact, hunting and show Labs differ not only in hunting ability but also in physical traits and temperament.

### What are the characteristics of hunting Labs?

Function—that is, the ability to hunt—is of foremost importance to the breeder of field Labs. The dog's appearance is secondary to his hunting ability. Hunting Labs don't always conform physically to the Labrador Retriever breed standard. Labs bred to hunt often have the following characteristics:

- Long legs, in proportion to their body size
- Lean, athletic build
- Narrower skull than that of the typical show Lab
- Intense desire to hunt and retrieve (often referred to as *birdiness*)
- High energy

The temperament of the hunter is an important quality. The hunting Lab must be able to get along well with others. He must be willing to work with a human partner, and he must be comfortable working in the company of other dogs.

### What are the characteristics of show Labs?

In order to compete successfully in conformation dog shows, show Labs must typify as closely as possible the Labrador Retriever breed standard. Thus, breeders of show Labs emphasize physical correctness over hunting

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ability. As with hunting Labs, temperament is still of the utmost importance. Compared to hunting Labs, the typical show Lab generally has the following characteristics:

- Shorter legs
- Heavier bone structure
- Broader head
- Less interest in hunting or retrieving
- Less ability to handle the mental and physical stresses of hunting
- A more easygoing, laid-back personality

### **Will this matter to me when I go looking for a pet Lab?**

It might. You'll need to consider both the physical and temperamental differences in the two types of Labs. If you know that you're not ever going to hunt with or show your Lab, it won't matter which type of dog you get, but you'll still need to decide which personality traits you prefer.

### **How will I know what the Lab I'm considering has been bred to do?**

You probably won't, if you get your Lab from a backyard breeder or the pet store. However, a responsible breeder will be able to tell you exactly what her Labs have been bred to do—and provide you with a list of accomplishments for the puppy's relatives for several generations back too. The breeder will also be able to tell you if the sire (father) and dam (mother) have any unique talents and abilities (such as assistance dog or search and rescue experience).

### **Can I get a mini-Lab?**

Yes and no. There is no such animal as a Miniature Labrador, like a Miniature Poodle. According to the Labrador Retriever breed standard, male Labs are supposed to be 22½ to 24½ inches in height (at the shoulder) and weigh 65 to 80 pounds. Females are expected to be a bit smaller, ranging in height from 21½ to 23½ inches and weighing 55 to 70 pounds.

Not every Lab perfectly matches the ideal. Some rather petite (for a Lab) females may be only about 20 inches tall and weigh 45 pounds. A very large male may be 26 inches tall and weigh close to 100 pounds. So it's definitely possible to find a Lab who's on the small (or the large) side.

## What color Lab should I get?

A Lab's color doesn't affect his suitability as a companion, so the choice is simply one of taste. Black has always been the most common color. Yellows and chocolates were found in early Labs, but apparently black was the most popular color for many generations. Some early breeders viewed yellow and chocolate Labs as inferior and possibly the result of cross-breeding. Because of this, yellows and chocolates either were not bred or, in extreme cases, were destroyed at birth.

## Are Labs always a solid color?

According to the breed standard, a Lab may have a small white spot on his chest, but it is not considered a desirable characteristic. No other white markings are permitted.

## Are golden Labs the same as yellow Labs?

There's no such thing as a golden Lab. In Labrador Retrievers, all shades of yellow or gold—from nearly white to fox-red—are correctly referred to as yellow. For some reason, Golden Retrievers—a different breed—are always referred to as “golden,” regardless of their hue.

## How long do Labs live?

Canine life span is determined by many factors, such as breed, genetic makeup, diet, health care and lifestyle/environmental considerations. Some factors, like breed (assuming you have your heart set on a Lab) and genetic make-up are difficult to modify. However, the owner has a great deal of influence on factors related to the physical care of the dog. With adequate nutrition, appropriate health care and a safe environment—all provided by a conscientious owner—a Labrador Retriever can usually be expected to live for about 12 to 14 years.

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### How long do Labs stay puppies?

That depends on whether you're referring to physical or mental development. Labs, like most dogs, are physically mature by about 12 to 18 months of age. Although most dogs reach mental maturity at about this same time, many Labs don't lose their puppyish behaviors and attitudes until they're about two to three years old. (Some Labs *never* seem to completely grow up.)

### Where do Labs come from?

The name "Labrador Retriever" is a bit of a misnomer—the breed was actually developed in Newfoundland, not Labrador. Historians believe English fishermen brought Lab predecessors to Newfoundland in the late 15th century. These dogs were used to retrieve fish and fishing lines back to the boats. These early fishing dogs had to be very athletic and extremely hardy, because the fishermen often fished for many hours in the cold Atlantic waters. It's quite likely that early Labs were also used for hunting. Whether the hunting skills were already developed in the dogs brought to Newfoundland or whether they were developed after the dogs arrived in North America is not known. After their development in the New World, Labs were exported back to England in the 18th century, where they were used extensively for hunting. The breed was introduced in the United States during World War I.

The Labrador Retriever was officially recognized as a breed by the British Kennel Club in 1903. In the United States, the breed was granted American Kennel Club recognition in 1917.

### Are modern Labs very different from early Labs?

Today's Labs share a number of similarities with their early ancestors. Some of these similarities are physical, such as size, build and coat characteristics. Other similarities are behavioral traits, such as independence, resourcefulness and overall attitude. Regardless of whether the trait is

physical or behavioral, most of them seem to have been strongly influenced by the Lab's working background.

## How has the Lab's working background influenced his temperament?

**People-oriented:** Early Labs not only shared their owners' work, they shared their homes and families as well. This resulted in dogs who were devoted to their humans and needed human companionship.

**Independent:** Early working Labs had to be willing to leave their human companions and retrieve ropes, fish or game on their own. This type of self-reliance may account for the independent—or even stubborn—attitude of the Lab.

**Boredom threshold:** Early Labs worked hard. The jobs were strenuous and the conditions were challenging. Today's Labs have an easier life, but they often become bored without adequate mental stimulation and regular vigorous exercise.

**Resourcefulness:** Early Labs had to be resourceful to accomplish their work of retrieving fish, ropes or birds. Today's Lab—especially when bored—may use this resourcefulness in less productive ways, such as devising an ingenious method to escape from confinement.

**Retrieving ability:** Retrieving—whether for fish or game—was the first Lab job. Because the best retrievers made the best working (and hunting) partners, this trait was undoubtedly the focus of selective breeding. Today's Lab, even if bred primarily for show rather than hunting, still has a highly developed retrieval instinct and will often retrieve any objects that are handy, such as bowls, toys or clothing.

**Love of water:** Labs have been swimming for more than 500 years, starting out in the frigid waters of Newfoundland. As hunting dogs, they were undeterred by water, plunging right in to bring back downed waterfowl. Is it really any wonder that today's Labs still love water?

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### **What are Labs used for today?**

Today's Labs have many jobs, but the most important one is that of a companion. In fact, Lab-human companionship is an integral part of every other Lab job. Since his earliest origins, the Lab has lived and worked side-by-side with his human partners, so it's not surprising that today's Labs excel at jobs that require close interaction with people. In addition to being kept as pets, Labs are also used for hunting, assistance/therapy work, search and rescue and detection work. For more information on these activities, see Chapter 9.

### **Are there any jobs that Labs can't do?**

Labs do many things well, but they're not suited for every canine job. For example, Labs don't make good guard dogs—they're just too friendly! Like most dogs, they'll probably bark at suspicious noises or intruders, but that's pretty much the extent of their guard dog efforts. You won't find many Labs pulling dogsleds either. Not that they couldn't; they just wouldn't do it as well as Siberian Huskies or Malamutes. Likewise, Labs don't excel at herding—that's a job best left to dogs like Border Collies and Old English Sheepdogs, who have been selectively bred for that skill.

### **Are Labs a popular breed?**

According to the American Kennel Club, the Labrador Retriever has been the most popular dog breed in the United States since 1990. There are more than one million Labs in the United States, with more than 150,000 new registrations per year. That's a lot of Labs!

### **Why do so many people want to have a Lab?**

A number of Lab characteristics, such as friendliness, gentleness and intelligence, contribute to the breed's popularity. These are traits that people often look for when selecting a dog for a pet. These same qualities



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make Labs well suited to work as guide dogs, hearing dogs and other service/therapy dogs. At the same time, the breed's hunting ability and athleticism appeal to sportsmen.

Obviously, a lot of people like Labs, but that doesn't mean that a Lab is the perfect dog for everyone. In fact, characteristics that would seem to be desirable might actually be undesirable in certain cases. For example, a friendly, people-oriented dog would probably not be the best choice for someone who wanted a guard dog. An active, athletic dog may require more exercise than an elderly owner could provide. Choosing any dog simply because it's a popular breed doesn't make sense at all—it's a little like choosing your favorite food based on what everyone else likes to eat! Every prospective dog owner should invest the time and effort to find their own most popular breed—the one that best suits *their* personality and lifestyle, not those of their neighbor or anyone else.

### **Have Labs always been popular?**

No. Ten years after the AKC first recognized Labs as a breed, there were fewer than 30 of them in the United States. The numbers gradually increased but dropped off during World War II. The popularity of Labs rose steadily after that, and the breed achieved AKC number one status in 1990.

### **What type of personality does a Lab have?**

In general, Labs are friendly, gentle and intelligent. They are also people-oriented dogs who enjoy spending time with their human companions. Labs can also be stubborn, so training requires patience and persistence. Active and athletic, Labs are happiest when they get plenty of vigorous exercise every day. Their love of exercise and hunting instincts may lead them to roam if not confined. Without human companionship and daily exercise, Labs often entertain themselves by developing destructive habits such as digging, chewing or Houdini-like escape attempts.

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## What are 10 good reasons to get a Lab?

- 1.** You want a companion. Labs crave human companionship and would gladly spend every minute of every day with their owners.
- 2.** You want a dog to share outdoor activities with. Labs enjoy just about any type of outdoor recreation, especially if it involves spending time with their human companions.
- 3.** You want a hunting dog who can do more than just hunt. After a day spent showing off his hunting ability in the field, the Labrador Retriever can easily switch from hunter to family pet.
- 4.** You want a dog who will be gentle with your children. Gentleness is a major personality trait of the Lab. (However, a young child should never be left unsupervised with a dog—for the protection of both the child and the dog.)
- 5.** You want a dog who doesn't require a lot of grooming beyond brushing and an occasional bath. The Lab's short, dense coat is good-looking, nicely tailored and—best of all—low maintenance.
- 6.** You want a dog who enjoys having a job. From fishing in 15th-century Newfoundland to search and rescue in modern-day New York City, Labrador Retrievers have always been working dogs. They're happiest when they've got a job to do—even if it's just working on basic obedience commands. If they can work side by side with their favorite person, so much the better.
- 7.** You want a dog who exudes puppylike enthusiasm. Labs take a long time to mature mentally, so a Lab who looks like an adult may still be a puppy at heart. Even after they've outgrown puppy behaviors, many Labs seem to retain an enthusiastic “What a great world!” attitude more typical of puppies than adults. If you want a dog who will joyfully participate in whatever it is you're doing, the Lab is a good choice for you.
- 8.** You want a dog who's friendly and people-oriented. No doubt about it: Labs are people dogs. They like working with people, playing with people, just hanging around with people. And not just their own families—the Lab's good-natured sociability usually extends to friends, neighbors and new acquaintances as well.

9. You want a dog who's energetic. Like young children, Labs seem to have boundless energy. You'll probably wear out before your Lab does!
10. You want a dog who's sturdy and athletic. Labs are not known for their delicate refinement, but for their robust athleticism. Bred for hard physical work, the Lab is well equipped to handle—and even relish—the rigors of even the most active family.

## What are 10 good reasons *not* to get a Lab?

1. Labs are active, energetic dogs. If you prefer to spend your free time reading or doing needlepoint, a Lab probably isn't the best dog for you (unless you can read and/or stitch while jogging!).
2. Hair today . . . and tomorrow. Labs shed more than you might expect, given their relatively short coat.
3. Labs can be chewers. Just about every puppy chews, but some Labs chew their way through adulthood too.
4. Labs stay puppies for a long time. Most dogs mature physically and mentally by about one year of age. Labs mature physically by then as well, but mental maturation can take up to 12 to 18 months longer. The result? A puppy with the size, strength and energy of an adult dog.
5. Labs are at risk for a number of inherited diseases. Most breeds have their share of inherited diseases, but Labs are susceptible to several that can cause serious health problems such as blindness, muscle abnormalities and crippling lameness. Although testing and certification programs have reduced the incidence of certain inherited diseases, parental certification does not guarantee that the puppies will be healthy.
6. Labs can be stubborn. You'll need patience and persistence to convince a Lab to do things your way. (Some people think the term “blockhead” refers to more than just the shape of the Lab's noggin.)

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7. Labs aren't neat freaks. To a water-loving Lab, that gloppy stuff isn't mud, it's really just water thickened with a little dirt! And—generous dog that he is—he'll be happy to bring it right into the house to share with you. If you don't think you'd like to experience nature in quite this way, you probably should pass up a Lab in favor of a dog who's more fastidious.
8. Labs can be gluey. A Lab's idea of companionship is spending every minute of every day with their favorite human. That's more togetherness than many people can tolerate.
9. Labs like to retrieve things. They're retrievers—they're supposed to like retrieving things. But you might not appreciate your Lab's innate talent when he starts retrieving your shoes, your car keys and the neighbor's lawn ornaments.
10. Labs are big. (Some people say that Labs are “larger than they look.”) Labs aren't considered large dogs, but even a medium-size Lab can knock over a toddler. A Lab can seem huge if your house is small and he's bouncing around asking to go for a walk.

## What type of person makes a good Lab owner?

Good dog owners often share many of the same characteristics, but some traits may be of greater importance depending on the chosen breed. In general, good Lab owners are:

**Committed:** A responsible dog owner must be committed to taking care of the dog for his lifetime—12 or more years in the case of the Lab. And it's a lot like marriage—for better or worse, in sickness and in health. . . .

**Active:** Labs are active, athletic dogs who do best with owners who can keep up with them—or who, if they can't, are willing to make the necessary arrangements to ensure that their Labs get adequate exercise.

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**Firm, but kind:** Labs, like all dogs, require training and discipline.

An owner who clearly indicates what is expected, then rewards the correct behavior (rather than punishing mistakes) will get the best results.

**Patient:** Labs can be stubborn. You may have to repeat that lesson over and over before your Lab finally gets it.

**Dog-oriented:** Labs are happiest with a lot of human companionship. It helps if they have an owner who likes a lot of dog companionship.

**Able to laugh:** Labs can be very funny dogs—some never seem to outgrow puppyhood. A sense of humor will make the funny moments all the funnier and will help you get through some of the not-so-funny moments too.

**Responsible:** A good Lab owner is responsible for his dog's care and also his dog's behavior.

## What does a Lab need?

All domestic dogs have certain needs that must be met to ensure their physical and mental health. These needs include:

Appropriate amounts of nutritionally balanced dog food and unlimited fresh water

Adequate veterinary care, including immunizations, deworming, dentistry and other health care as needed

Discipline and training for basic manners and obedience

Daily exercise

A safe living environment

Human companionship

The specific needs of the Labrador Retriever—and how they can best be met by the Lab owner—are discussed in detail in the following chapters of this book.