

Things You Need to Know Before Adopting a Double Merle Dog

©Debbie Bauer 2015

Thank you for considering adopting a double merle dog! Here are some things that you may want to consider before adopting. This way you can make an educated decision as to whether the dog you are considering is a good match for your home.

Many double merle dogs may be deaf or hearing impaired to some degree. Hair cells in the inner ear need to have pigment in order for the dog to hear. Without pigment, the nerve endings do not develop properly and the dog will be deaf or partially deaf. Looking at the color on the dog's ear is not an indicator. The inner ear cannot be seen by just looking in the ear. It is way down inside the ear canal. A dog can have a white outer ear but still be able to hear if the inner ear has pigment. It can also have a colored ear and be deaf.

Some people are afraid of adopting a deaf dog. They assume that the dog will startle easily and will be prone to biting. Deaf dogs adapt very well to their hearing loss. They learn routines and expectations in the environment where they live. Yes, they can be startled by an unexpected touch. Hearing dogs startle from unexpected touches too, it is just harder to sneak up on a hearing dog without it knowing you are coming. Most dogs that startle do not turn and bite. They will jump a little bit and then turn to see what is going on. There are ways to help a deaf dog be more comfortable with being touched. See some of my other articles for information about this.

When waking up a deaf dog, be courteous. Step a bit harder with your feet as you approach to give off a vibration through the floor. Blowing gently on the dog can help it to wake up more gently than an unexpected touch. Always reward your dog after waking it up to help it associate your touch with good things.

Some people think a deaf dog may be difficult to train. Giving voice commands to dogs is a human preference. Dogs don't care much about spoken words. They are much more tuned into watching our body language and visual cues. That is the language they share with each other, so it comes naturally to them. Our visual cues stand out to dogs much more than our words do. Deaf dogs are very observant. They will take their cues from any other dogs in the home and will respond just as quickly. They will respond to vibrations they feel around them. And they will learn what even your smallest body movements mean – just by observing! It is very easy to teach them hand signals.

Many double merle dogs have eye defects as well. These defects can occur in any color of eye. The actual size and shape of the eye may be affected. Some have smaller than usual eyes. Some have pupils that are irregularly shaped. Pupils may have jagged or spiky edges, look like

starbursts, and/or be different sizes and appear to have pieces missing from the darker pigmented parts.

Eyes may be very sensitive to light because the pupil doesn't react properly. Some pupils appear to be in the wrong place in the eye and it may look like the dog is looking in a different direction than where he is facing. Some dogs may appear to have no eyes, or may have eyes covered by the third eyelid permanently. Dogs with affected eyes may show a combination of these defects. Any of these eye defects can cause varying degrees of visual impairment, including blindness.

Dogs with visual impairments need some special consideration. They will learn their way around your home and yard fairly quickly. They will create a map in their mind of the various obstacles in their environment. Be aware of bushes and other low obstacles that may poke the dog's eyes if they run into them. Putting a small garden fence around these places will allow your yard to still look attractive while keeping the dog safe. Any drop offs need to be safely gated off. In-ground swimming pools, steep flights of steps, balconies, large holes in the yard – any of these can be dangerous to a dog that can't see properly. Some double merles may be able to see, but may have difficulty with depth perception, also needing to be kept safe from drop offs. On walks, you will need to warn your dog of curbs and steer her clear of obstacles and people in her path.

It is very important with dogs that have visual and/or hearing impairments to always ensure their safety! They are at a disadvantage. Keep your fences and gates securely closed. A deaf dog will not be able to hear you calling if it gets out, nor will it be able to hear cars and other dangers coming towards it. A blind dog will be able to hear you calling, but won't be able to see to stay out of harm's way or to avoid running into things that could injure it. It is not safe to allow your blind or deaf dog to wander off leash. It is not worth the risk. Always supervise your dog outdoors when it's not in a secure fence! If you want to give your dog more room to explore, you can attach a long line to its collar so you can still hold one end and have control immediately in an emergency situation.

Dogs that are both blind and deaf need all of the considerations listed above for blind and for deaf dogs. Another important safety consideration is that blind-deaf dogs cannot recognize normal dog to dog communication signals. They are not able to hear a growl or other vocalizations, nor are they able to see the other dog's body language that says "stay away!" Because of this, blind-deaf dogs can get into trouble with other dogs. Not all other dogs understand or are tolerant of being bumped into by a blind-deaf dog. Not all dogs are even tolerant of other dogs in general. You must keep your dog safe.

Dogs communicate with each other constantly. They expect other dogs to respond appropriately to these communications. A dog that does not respond appropriately will be disciplined. Even without meaning any harm, a dog can injure the blind-deaf dog. The blind-deaf dog will not be able to see the discipline coming its way and won't be able to respond and get out of the way. This may mean that a blind and deaf dog should be separated from other

dogs when you are away from home, depending upon the circumstance and the dogs involved. It also means that environments with lots of other dogs, such as dog parks, may not be a good place to take your blind and deaf dog. This will depend upon the dogs involved. Always proceed with caution.

Many double merle dogs are mostly white with pink skin and noses that are prone to sunburn. This is especially true in short haired dogs and dogs with white faces where the hair is shorter and thinner. It is important to minimize exposure to heavy sunlight and to use a sunscreen that is non-toxic and safe for pets. Put the sunscreen on your hands first and then rub it onto the dog's face, ears, and nose. If you are going to be outside for an extended period of time, remember to reapply the sunscreen periodically. Stay in the shade whenever possible during the brightest parts of the day. A short haired dog can wear a lightweight T-shirt to help protect its body as well.

Many people think that double merles cannot be healthy and will have a whole host of medical issues. While it is true that some double merles do have other health and medical conditions, there is no research showing that these issues are a result of their merle to merle breeding. Dogs that are not merles have these same issues too. However, people who breed merle to merle litters are not concerned with proper breeding practices and doing genetic and other health clearances on their dogs. Getting a dog from an unknown genetic past is always an unknown. That being said, there are many double merle dogs with no other health issues than that which is mentioned above. They are perfectly healthy in every other way and live long happy lives.

Please know that deaf, blind and blind/deaf dogs are not helpless. They enjoy the same activities that other dogs enjoy. They still need exercise, grooming, playtime and training. Research the breed of dog you are considering and the tendencies for that breed. A double merle is a dog first, then a dog of its breed, and then a dog with differing needs, in that order. There are many double merles in need of homes and it can be very rewarding to bring one into your family. Please be sure you ask questions and take time to think about whether you commit to giving this dog everything it needs for the next 15 or more years. And if you decide you can, may you and your new double merle friend have a lifetime of happiness together!

. Debbie Bauer is a certified Healing Touch for Animals® practitioner, a certified Tellington TTouch® practitioner, a published author, and a professional dog trainer. She has over 28 years of training and consulting experience working with dogs and their people. She specializes in working with dogs that display fearful, reactive and aggressive behaviors, in a positive manner. Debbie has trained dogs in a variety of fields including therapy and assistance dogs, print ad and media work, obedience, agility, and scent work. One of her passions is working with and educating about deaf, blind, and blind/deaf dogs.