



How the Trend Toward Smaller Dogs May Affect Veterinary Practice

Article by Roxanne Hawn

American dog lovers now favor smaller dogs. This trend will likely affect veterinary practice as well as the needs, activities and questions veterinary clients have.

The data

Gen Z (currently between the ages of 13 and 24) and Millennials (currently between the ages of 25 and 39) drive at least part of this trend toward smaller dogs. According to *Gen Z and Millennials as Pet Market Consumers: Dogs, Cats and Other Pets*, published by Packaged Facts in February 2018, these younger generations of dog owners are “more likely than their older counterparts to have a dog under 25 pounds or to own a medium-sized dog weighing 25 to 40 pounds. They are less likely to have a large dog in the 40-plus-pound weight category.”

Across pet owners of all ages, the small dog trend is also evident. In early 2019, Packaged Facts national pet owners survey asked respondents, “What size is your most recently acquired dog?” Researchers found that, overall, 40 percent of recently acquired dogs weigh less than 25 pounds at adulthood, and a total of 63 percent weigh less than 40 pounds. Large dogs between 41 and 90 pounds, however, remain popular with people living in rural communities

Clinical concerns

Broadly speaking, seeing more smaller dogs in daily practice likely means more diagnoses of things such as:

- Diabetes
- Dental disease
- Luxating patellas
- Heart issues (especially in Cavalier King Charles Spaniels)
- Calcium oxalate stones
- Portosystemic shunts

- Collapsing tracheas
- Stepped-on injuries
- Breathing problems in flat-faced dogs
- Other problems common in dogs deliberately bred to be “teacup” sized
- Obesity (from being carried a lot, not exercised enough)

You’re also likely to field more questions about vaccine dosage sizes and adverse vaccine reactions as people with really small dogs simply do not understand why a 100-pound dog and a three-pound dog receive the same size vaccination dose.

For clients who’ve lived with larger dogs in the past, your team may also need to do additional nutritional education to help people understand food needs of smaller dogs, including more frequent feeding schedules and the importance of calorie density.

Remember, as well, to look at your practice environment through the eyes of such small dogs. Examination tables seem higher. People seem bigger and potentially scarier. Depending on the dogs’ socialization, bigger dogs might seem like monsters.

You might also need additional weight scales that can better track ounces, instead of pounds, since even a tiny drop or increase in weight can be a big deal in a tiny dog.

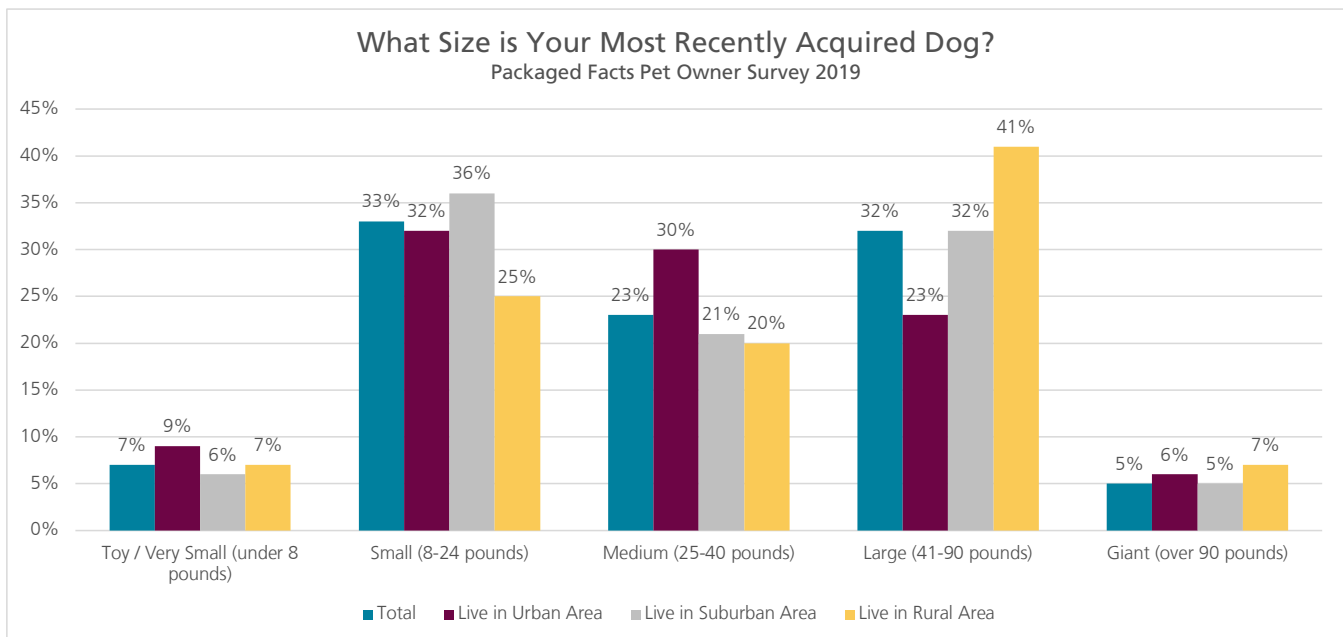
Behavioral concerns

There is a good chance you’ll hear more about housetraining issues with really small dogs. Especially in urban environments, consumers seem more open to indoor potty-spot solutions rather than traditional housetraining where always-outside elimination is typically required. And, while that may be okay for some people, if small dogs allowed to eliminate inside the house ever need to be rehomed, there could be a real problem. Rare are the people who want adult dogs who still soil in the house because they’ve been allowed to their entire lives.

With smaller dogs often being bred with poor husbandry and non-existent enrichment or socialization at so-called “puppy mills,” you may also see behavioral issues that require more than typical dog training. That includes fear behaviors that need medications, serious behavior modification, or other creative solutions to help them feel safe and relaxed.

Lifestyle concerns

Because small dogs are much more portable than big ones, you will likely have patients traveling more, including on long international flights. Therefore, there is a good chance you’ll field more questions about small dog carriers and other pet products meant to make traveling with small dogs safer and easier. In addition, travel to other areas



where certain diseases, parasites, and other risks are more prevalent, so during history-taking and diagnostic workups, you may need to know more about your patient's recent travels.

Some small breeds of dogs have the potential to live a long time, and depending upon the age and living situation of clients upon acquisition of a small or tiny dog, the dog may be more likely to face a rehoming situation due to major changes in the clients' lifestyle, relocation, or living or family situation. In other words, more middle-aged and older Chihuahuas, for example, may face a serialized experience, with several homes and families in their lives.

Money concerns

The average cost of dog food per pound has increased 46 percent between 2011 and 2017, according to *Pet Industry Outlook: Veterinary Services and Pet Product Retailing*, published by Packaged Facts in May 2018. This price jump is driven by a growing preference for smaller dogs. It's a lot easier for consumers to shoulder higher pet food

prices with dogs who don't eat very much. On the flipside, though, people with larger dogs may feel a financial pinch from rising pet food pricing.

If your practice adjusts anesthesia and other procedure or services costs based on a dog's size, then you'll likely see gross revenues fall for certain items in your budget. For example, if you've always charged less for spay/neuter surgeries in small dogs, then a drop in big dog surgeries will likely mean a drop in surgery income.

You'll probably need to shift your pharmacy and other inventory items, as well, so that you're well stocked for the meds, dosages, and other items small dogs need more than big ones. If your pharmacy pricing is based on dog size, then you'll probably need financial adjustments in your budget here too.

Big dog concerns

Just as clients with feline friends appreciate a cat-only area in your lobby, the growth in small dog ownership may drive decisions to set up designated waiting areas, and maybe

Be Wary of Small Dog Stereotypes

Caitlin Magee's family had Scottish terriers when she was young, and she lived with a golden retriever for a while as an adult. Yet, she considered herself a cat person, until her partner shared his passion for Chihuahuas. They now live with four rescued Chihuahuas—Joey (6), Mike (8), Kiki (3) and Lola (7 months).

Joey came first and from dire hoarding circumstances. He could hardly walk. He had no elimination control, and he was terrified of everything after spending the first two years of his life in a box.

When Magee first took Joey to see her long-time veterinarian, things didn't go so well. Even though they'd been through years of feline care together, including crying over euthanasia, and even though the veterinarian herself lived with a Chihuahua, she said to Magee, "If you ask me, this dog is just too much work."

Magee says, "To feel like I didn't get any support was really devastating ... I never went back."

Magee's dogs have come a long way from their humble beginnings and are now fixtures at local small dog meet-ups. The quartet of tiny canine friends also go hiking, where other hikers often laugh as if tiny dogs aren't really dogs.

"People assume they are purse dogs," Magee says, "and we don't treat them that way. Chihuahuas get a bad reputation because of how people treat them, not like dogs, but dolls."

Mike, in particular, is a hearty backpacker who can chug along for many miles over many days. "We don't know how far Mike can go because he has never tired out," she says.

Other stereotypes include that small dogs are yappy and bitey and unfriendly, so look for subtle and non-subtle ways bias may creep into conversations with clients

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even designated entry doors, for dogs of different sizes.

As society begins to favor smaller dogs, people with big dogs may face additional challenges. Many hotels already define their dog-friendly status as welcoming dogs under 25 pounds. This idea is already spreading to landlord and leasing rules for apartments and single-family homes. That means clients with larger dogs may be more likely to face rehoming situations if they cannot find rental housing that allows larger dogs.

The plan

Even if you're not already seeing this trend play out in your community, it's good to think ahead about shifts you may need to make in the future. Is now the time to adjust your pricing models to avoid future income dips due to lower pricing for smaller dogs? Can you think of easy, low-cost ways to adjust your lobby or exam rooms to address any

worries small dogs might have about the current set-up? Should you arrange additional vaccination education training for your staff so that everyone is prepared for vaccine dosage questions and adverse vaccine reaction concerns? Can you arrange a workshop on restraining smaller dogs for your team?

Now may be a good time to reach out to members of your professional network in urban areas who likely already see a higher percentage of tiny dogs to learn more.



Roxanne Hawn is a professional writer and award-winning blogger based in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. A former writer/editor for the American Animal Hospital Association and the American Humane Association, she has written about veterinary medicine and pet topics for nearly 20 years. Her work has also appeared in The New York Times, Reader's Digest, Natural Home, Bankrate.com, WebMD, The Bark, Modern Dog, and many high-profile outlets. Her first book is called *Heart Dog: Surviving the Loss of Your Canine Soul Mate*.

