

# Puppy Mill Red Flags – Don't Be an Accidental Supporter

I remember bugging my parents for years to get a dog — and when they finally did, he didn't last very long because of his health. I often remember this dog and his poor health and wonder where he came from. Did my parents adopt him, find him from a neighbor or purchase him at a pet store? This had me wondering if my first pet was a puppy mill dog.

We have come a long way since then with stronger laws, more active opposition from animal organizations and public outcry for reform, but puppy mills are still in operation. This comprehensive list seeks to provide clues and signs to help you learn how to recognize a puppy mill or an irresponsible breeder and what you can do about it.



Learn how to recognize puppy mill red flags.

## Recognizing the Puppy Mill Red Flags

While it may take a combination of signs to indicate a breeder is operating a puppy mill, some of these are direct flags all on their own:

### Site Inspections

If the breeder is willing to let you visit his home or breeding facility, this is an important step to ensure your puppy comes from a happy and safe environment. Don't assume the offer is reason enough not to accept the invitation. Obviously if he's offering, he has nothing to hide, right? Wrong.

#### Look for these warning signs when visiting the location:

- There is a recognizable or overwhelming odor that is foul or unpleasant. Beware of an overuse of deodorizers or bleach as this may have been used to cover up an odor, which is usually a sign of a more serious problem.
- The appearance and health of the animals can reveal the level of care they are given. Look for dirty or long coats, missing teeth, eye or nose discharge, overgrown nails, visible injuries or sores, patches of missing fur or excessive scratching.

- Temperament is an important insight as well. Are any of the animals aggressive, vicious, excessively shy or fearful?
- If the cages or containment areas for the animals look more like a parking garage than comfortable accommodations, this is another concern. Animals should have enough room to turn around, stand on their hind legs and have a clean sleeping area away from food and water.
- Animals are contained in an area with urine or feces (or both).
- The animals are not properly protected from the weather. Outdoor facilities should be climate controlled in areas with extreme heat or cold, and adequate shelter for all animals should be available. Look for small structures in disrepair or animals chained to fences, trees or stakes.
- No food or water is visibly available to every animal, or the water is dirty. It takes so little time to clean a bowl and provide fresh water, and this is a blatant sign of neglect that should have sirens going off as soon as you see it.
- Animals are either too skinny or overweight. A healthy weight is a good sign of nutrition and exercise. Underweight puppies are not getting enough food or may be sick, while overweight puppies may be either fed too much or not allowed to exercise.
- The numbers don't add up. If there is only one or two people at the location but dozens of dogs, it would seem impossible to think each dog gets proper care, exercise and socialization. Unless they work in shifts or have a system for individualized care, ask them to explain their process or check for other signs listed here.
- The breeding parents are not available or kept offsite. So basically their site is where the puppies get dropped off every time the parents breed, and this can also be a sign that the parents are kept in horrible conditions or are being forced to breed with every heat cycle.
- There is only one female breeding. Forcing one dog to constantly breed at every heat cycle is cruel and can cause health concerns. The dogs are also more likely to be destroyed once they are no longer able to produce litters.
- The breeder has no idea how many litters the female has produced. This is scary: The dog was bred so many times or records were never kept of the offspring.
- All of the animals appear to be sleeping or lethargic. This can be a sign of very poor health, or the animals may have been medicated to cover up a more serious problem.

**This video shows a puppy mill worker who left his employer because of the condition and treatment of the dogs:**

Before heading to the site, make sure to bring a camera. Take pictures of any of these signs to document the conditions. If the breeder says pictures are not allowed, this is a major problem.

**Or you could do what I did:** I said my husband was on a business trip but wanted me to email pictures of the puppies I liked so he could pick one. It worked, and eventually that was one less puppy mill in operation.

## Don't Be Fooled by Registration

Many breeders use the term "papers" or "registered" to

give the illusion of approval from a governing body of either the facility conditions or the type of breed. Many people also assume this provides evidence of the health of the puppies — [not true](#).

While the breeder may register the parents or grandparents of the puppies, the governing body usually doesn't perform inspections or monitor the breeder's operation. **It's just a piece of paper.**

If you are provided a registration certificate or papers from an organization, be sure to call, email or check online lists to see if the breeder is actually registered or if his privileges have been suspended. If he uses a registration you have never heard of before, check it out either online or through a local business bureau. Your local animal shelter or humane society may be able to help determine if the organization is fake or untrustworthy.

Beware of sellers of specific breeds that do not register with at least one of the breed's parent organizations or cannot explain the breed standard. Reputable breeders of only one type of dog usually choose them for their love of the breed, their existing pets and/or a desire to preserve the breed for future generations. If the seller can't answer these questions or why he chose the breed he did (or worse, he says it's because the puppies are very expensive), there's an obvious problem.

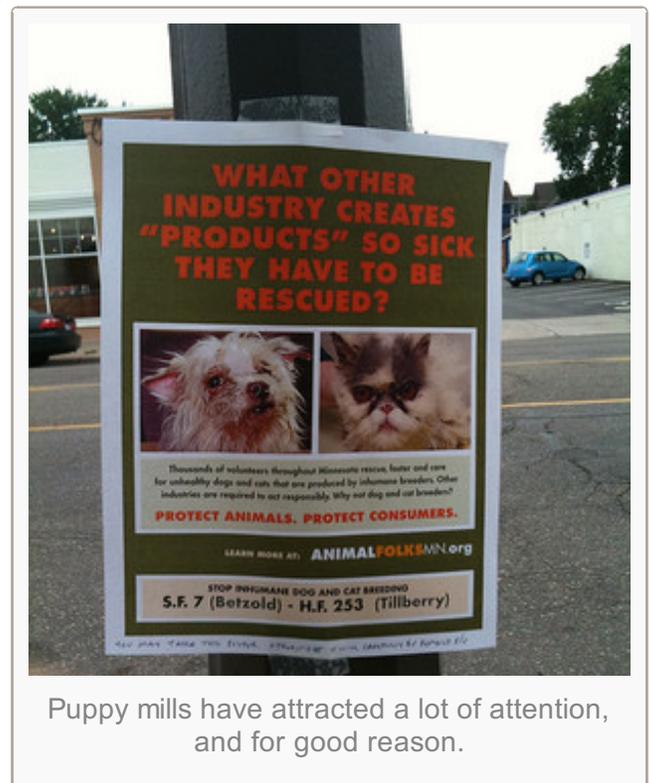
Responsible breeders who follow a breed standard are concerned about genetic health issues and will have screenings done to ensure the puppies will be healthy. If they do not have screenings on the puppies, they should be able to offer health documentation about the parents. If this documentation is refused or not available, or if the breeder refuses to provide information, documentation or photographs of the parents, this can be another serious red flag.

Other signs to look out for include a breeder claiming his registration is pending, the papers are not available at the time of purchase, or the breeder does not hold a license or registration with any reputable organization, local licensing bureau or the USDA (usually required for any breeder who sells to brokers or pet stores).

## Transaction Concerns

The above lists provide thorough information to spot puppy mill red flags, but there are more considerations in regard to the exchange of money for the puppy. Be wary if the breeder or seller does any of the following:

- Insists on only cash or money orders as means of payment.
- Produces no permit from state or local authorities allowing him to sell puppies.
- Has complaints pending with business bureaus, humane societies or the local police department and gets nervous when you ask about this.
- Was arrested or convicted for a crime involving animals.



Puppy mills have attracted a lot of attention, and for good reason.

- Says the sale is final — no returns and no refunds.

If the seller shows signs of any of the above, it's likely he will disappear as fast as the money leaves your hands. Always check the seller's name or business name before agreeing to purchase the puppy. Many breeders in trouble with the authorities will move to another state and start up all over again (the "I just moved here with all my dogs and haven't had a chance to get x-y-z" is another puppy mill red flag). These breeders are hard to catch, but they can't run forever. **That's why we need you.**



## Take Action

Many people are aware of overpopulation and unhealthy animals from puppy mills but are unsure how they can help.

If you are considering buying a puppy from a breeder and come across any red flags, try to document or photograph the site and report the breeder to the local humane society, animal control office and the police department. The police department may not be properly equipped or experienced to handle the investigation and removal of the animals on its own, but the cooperation of multiple authorities will help find a solution.

Many times a rescue organization will be able to help remove the animals, clean and evaluate them and transport them to a humane society with room to hold them until a court decides they can be adopted. Follow up on your complaints, and contact the USDA if the breeder holds a license from their organization.

If you find a pet store still selling puppies, raise your concerns with the manager. You might be able to convince them their practice is wrong, refuse to shop at their store — or get shown the front door. It's still important to say *something*. **Saying nothing only ensures their practices will remain the same.** Tell your family and friends about the store, ask them to complain, and contact local shelters and rescues to work together in getting needy animals in the store for adoptions.

Most pet stores have stopped selling puppies and started offering only shelter or rescue pets for adoption (I wish they would *all* do this). While the stores still charge fees, the money is an adoption fee that helps the shelter or rescue continue to care for needy animals and is no longer a source of profit for the store. If they don't already do this, ask them to start.

**Vets, I'm looking at you too.** If you have a client who brings in the same dog or multiple dogs for c-sections a little too often, it's time to raise some concerns. You could be unknowingly helping a puppy mill to continue operating, and sometimes you might be the only person to see the continuous breeding.

Another sign is a client with a large number of animals coming in with only serious injuries or ailments. Don't be afraid to ask questions. I'm a responsible pet owner and would answer any question you ask, and any reputable breeder should be able to do the same.

In an ideal world, we'd be able to track down every puppy mill, shut them down, and the various animal welfare organizations could report that their work here is done. But that's not realistic and as long as people are motivated by money, they will use animals for profit and a source of steady revenue. We have domesticated these animals and have a responsibility to ensure they receive proper care. We are their voice — never stop questioning and speaking for them.

## How you can help stop puppy mills

**Q**uestion breeders and pet stores.

**U**rge pet stores to support shelters and rescues instead of dollar signs.

**E**ducate family and friends about puppy mills.

**S**hare the links, posts, tweets and stories to raise awareness.

**T**alk to legislators and local authorities to strengthen laws and penalties against puppy mills.

**I**nspect breeders thoroughly, and report them if they raise a red flag.

**O**rganize meetings, fundraisers or shelter adoptions to decrease puppy mill demands.

**N**o more profits for puppy mills and the pet stores that support them!



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## Adopt, Don't Buy

If you [consider getting a new pet](#), please check adoption resources first. [Even purebred animals can end up in shelters.](#)

Try Pets Adviser's [dog adoption center](#).

## Additional Resources:

- **USDA** — [Registered breeders by state \(USA\)](#)
- **Madonna of the Mills** — [Recent puppy mill statistics](#)
- **ASPCA** — [The "No Pet Store Puppies" pledge](#)

*Photos: Tree Leaf Clover (top), adria.richards/Flickr, Humane Society of the United States*

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