

Understanding Lethal White

Presented By

What Are Lethal Whites?

The following information is intended to help people understand exactly what is meant by the term “Lethal White” when used to describe an Australian Shepherd.

“Lethal White” does not refer to lethal genetics, i.e., the pup being born dead, or dying soon after birth. Instead the term has been used to mean the same as “Double Merle” or “Homozygous Merle/White”. The name “Lethal White”, in reference to Aussies, stems from the fact that these white pups have historically been destroyed at birth because of the likelihood they may be blind, deaf or both. For these pups, being born white is lethal for them.

To accurately describe the double merle genetics, understanding a little about the merle gene is necessary. Aussies come in two acceptable colors:

- Solid (*m*)
- Merle (*M*)

The merle gene is dominant and is represented by the capital “*M*”, and the solid is recessive, represented by the small “*m*”. An Aussie has a combination of these two genes.

The combination may be *mm*, *Mm*, or *MM*. A dog with the “*mm*” gene is a solid-colored dog (such as black or red tri). “*Mm*” is a heterozygous (meaning mixed) gene and will produce a merle (such as blue or red merle) colored dog. “*MM*” is the homozygous (meaning like) merle gene, and will produce a pup that is mostly white, and usually deaf and/or blind. This is the “Lethal White” Aussie.

Lethal Whites can only result from a merle to merle breeding, but not every puppy in the litter is a homozygous (*MM*) white. Statistics indicate that approximately 25% of the litter will be homozygous pups. The pups may show signs of deafness, blindness, or a combination of the two. However, it should be noted, that some pups with this gene can hear and see. Those pups are the lucky ones. The defects can vary from minor vision and hearing loss to complete deafness and blindness. Double merles can also be born without eyes, or eyes that have failed to develop properly. These pups are almost always predominantly white. It is possible however, to have a “normally” marked merle that carries the double merle gene (*MM*).

The negative aspects of this syndrome are congenital, and are usually evident when the eyes and ears open. If a dog

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Breeders

Don't breed your merle dogs to other merle dogs. The only way you get a Lethal White is by breeding two merle dogs together. **Lethal White is a breeding problem.** There is no denying, or getting around that issue, and it is up to breeders to stop breeding practices that harm the breed.

Don't over-breed. This is not so much a Lethal White issue as it is a general dog overpopulation issue. Don't make your lack of foresight into a Rescue problem.

Police your ranks. While we realize that many breeders are responsible, there are also many who are irresponsible. It is up to the breeding community to police its ranks.

Responsible breeders need to mentor, so that those less educated, and newer to breeding, don't breed merle to merle out of ignorance.

Dog Owners

Adopt a Lethal White, and give it a

good and loving home where its unique qualities can be appreciated and understood.

Don't purchase "purebred" dogs from pet stores. Most "purebred" dogs that are found in pet stores come from puppy mill "breeders" who are catering to mass production of low quality animals to fuel the pet trade. It is an unfortunate fact that most "breeders" who breed merle to merle are of the backyard and puppy mill variety, and the best way to stop the tragedy is to provide them no outlet to sell their dogs.

We have heard of instances where "breeders" have advertised "rare white Australian Shepherds". Don't be fooled.

Spay and neuter your pets. A huge portion of the homeless dog population, including a portion of the population of Lethal Whites, comes as a direct result of owners who do not ensure that their pet animals are spayed and neutered.

[Information](#)

For more information and links to related sites, please visit our web sites at:

www.coloradoaussierescue.org
www.amazingaussies.com

appears normal between the ages of 6 to 12 months, they should not develop problems specifically related to the double merle gene (*MM*). However, it should be noted here that because of the genetics, the eyes will be more sensitive than regular eyes, and should be monitored. Depending on the condition of the eyes, problems can develop later in life, and it is possible that these dogs could lose some or all of their vision.

The goal of this pamphlet is to educate the general public, and encourage anyone interested in adding an Australian Shepherd to their home to consider the many positive aspects that Lethal White Aussies possess. The Lethal White Aussie is just as loving and capable as a "normal" Aussie with the exception of the need for extra attention specific to their special needs.

Lethal White Aussies can compete in open agility competitions even when deaf or visually impaired. They can also become Certified Therapy Dogs.

For the most part, a Lethal White Aussie can do almost everything a normal Aussie can do!

Training for a special needs dog of any breed can be done as successfully and easily as any "normal" dog. All it takes