

So You Want an Alaskan Malamute?

Great! You've seen them on TV, in the movies, or you've been to a dog show or two. Maybe you just met a pair in the park or a cute happy puppy and said to yourself...

"I want a Malamute!"

Now that you know what you like, you need to ask yourself the question:

"WHY?" ...and *please*, do be honest!

Why do I want an Alaskan Malamute?

Do you just like a pretty dog? Do you want a big dog to impress the neighbors, scare the crooks, or just looks like a wolf? The kids talk you into one? Is that puppy in the window simply the cutest ball of teddy bear fluff? Is it somebody's birthday or a gift-giving holiday?

If you just said yes to any of those.... then do yourself a big favor right now: run to the nearest toy store and buy yourself a stuffed toy. The Alaskan Malamute is not the right dog breed for you!

However, if you actually took the time to ask yourself "WHY" you are interested in Malamutes and "WHAT" attracted you to this breed, you are off to a good start! It can be difficult to say what first attracts a person to a Malamute, but if you are unwilling to ask yourself these questions - you are probably not interested to learn much about this breed of dog. Malamutes may live into their "teens" so you will have a lot to learn with this breed to have a happy long-term relationship!

What do I know about Alaskan Malamutes?

There is a lot of history surrounding the Alaskan Malamute. To understand their history is a good start at understanding the breed itself and how to live with a Mal. There are many good reading sources on the breed's history, but here is a quick synopsis to get you started:

Malamutes were used by native Alaskans to pull heavy loads in the harsh arctic conditions and to hunt food. The arctic demands a "survival of the fittest" attitude, so Malamutes retain most of the "pack order" instinct. They needed intelligence and problem solving abilities to make independent decisions about trail hazards, including disobeying orders from their human companions. Arctic food is often scarce. It was highly important to eat whenever the opportunity arose and to get the most energy possible from any food eaten. Malamutes also supplemented their diet with prey caught in the wild. Simply put, centuries of their original arctic environment molded the Alaskan Malamute both physically and mentally.

Ok, so what does all that have to do with Alaskan Malamutes and you in these modern times? PLENTY! Malamutes have not changed their behavior to suit you, suburbia, or anything else. They have only modified it somewhat...

Personality:

The Alaskan Malamute is a very friendly dog with humans. Mals are not one-person or even one-family dogs. There are very few people they will not like, which makes them unsuitable to being good watch or guard dogs. Mals usually get along well with children, especially when

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raised with them. (Note: caution is always advised due to their size). Although friendly and often sensitive to their owner's moods, Malamutes are highly independent and strong willed. Adult Malamutes may have a quiet and reserved manner, or may be the perpetual child always willing to play. Mals do love to be the center of attention and will often demand it. They are alert to their surroundings and curious about the world around them. Mals can be described as cat-like in the way they groom themselves, body posture when relaxing, or in their attitude.

Pack Order:

Although friendly to humans, Malamutes must establish a pack order within their family - human or canine. Remember - NO DOG should have a placement in the pack that is higher than the lowest human member! Some Mals are content with their place in the family pack, other more dominant Mals may challenge their humans for a higher pack placement.

With humans, this pack challenge may take the form of the Mal consistently refusing commands, becoming physically rough, being possessive, or even growling. A full sized Malamute cannot be forced to obey or respect you, so never start out by using highly physical training methods with a pup. Early training and a good understanding of basic dog behavior goes a long way in keeping a Malamute "in line". Mals respond best to "positive reinforcement" training methods such as "clicker" and "motivational" training.

Alaskan Malamutes are a dog-dominant breed. What this means is although a Mal may never challenge a human over pack order, they may certainly challenge another dog. Same sex challenges (M/M, F/F) can lead to serious fights if both dogs are equally dominant, or one is a younger animal seeking to establish itself.

Intelligence:

The Alaskan Malamute is an intelligent breed. Remember, any smart dog will become bored

and destructive long before a not-so-smart dog will! Never underestimate what amount of furniture, carpet, books, or even walls(!) that a Malamute can damage in a small amount of time. Malamutes will often choose to "live for the moment" and to worry (or not!) about any consequences later.

Malamutes learn commands very quickly. However, if they don't see the point of following the command, they can just as quickly disobey them. Remember this is part of their breed heritage and learn to be creative when teaching or practicing commands. Mals may very well refuse to follow a command that is well known to them, resulting in a reputation for stubbornness or "selective hearing".

Mals can be clownish at times and many possess a sense of humor (dog humor of course!) sometimes resulting in great embarrassment to the owner. They can be quite creative at getting your attention or just adding a little "twist" to things just to see your reaction. Malamutes can be manipulative when they want something.

Malamutes are great problem solvers and can be quite inventive when motivated. If there is something they want... they will find a way to go over, under, around, or through any obstacle. Never be surprised if items disappear from shelves, counters, or even the top of your refrigerator without any trace of a Malamute passing through!

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Active & Working Dogs:

The Alaskan Malamute is the equivalent of a long distance runner, and as such needs plenty of exercise. Many are still great "couch potatoes", which is certainly a holdover from conserving energy in the arctic. However, when they are active they are very, VERY active. A large, fenced yard is preferred for keeping a Malamute in the city. Even so, they should be walked or given some other form of exercise every day. Although they can readily adapt to apartment living, the owner must be very dedicated to providing the proper amount of exercise. Mals that kept primarily outside the house or on larger property should be provided a sturdy run with a covered kennel or large doghouse.

Since they were bred to run, Mals also have a tendency to roam the neighborhood or countryside. Never let your Malamute "off-leash" as few are consistently trustworthy to commands (unless they wish to be of course!) and are not particularly mindful to road traffic. In the countryside, they may learn to chase wildlife and livestock, or may be mistaken for wolves. Loose Malamutes under any of these circumstances may end up killed or seriously injured. Alaskan Malamutes still pull people, sleds and heavy loads. Today, these activities are usually pleasure sledding and skijoring, as well as the sports of racing & weight pulling. In warmer climates, many accompany their owners on hikes & backpacking, at carting, bike rides, and skating/rollerblading. For the safety of you and your dog, great care must be taken to have your Mal properly secured and under control when biking or skating. A very determined Mal is hard enough to stop without having wheels beneath your feet!

You will also find Malamutes trained in search & rescue, agility, obedience, and therapy work. They are quite adaptable to most activities presented to them, love to work, and are very social with most people.

Hunting & The Prey Drive:

Alaskan Malamutes possess a strong "prey drive" which is part of the basic hunting instinct. If it moves or squeals, a Mal will chase it - sometimes with dangerous consequences. Malamutes may kill rabbits, squirrels, birds, as well as neighborhood cats or small dogs. Mals rarely do well with cats, unless raised with them and learned to control their natural instincts. Some Mals can never be trusted around other smaller animals, even when raised together. Mals need to learn caution and control around children. Besides their love of humans, some are also attracted to children because of the quick movements and high-pitched voices (similar to those of small hurt animals - a natural prey). Mals tend to play rough and, due to their size and power, could injure a child without ever meaning to do them harm. Never leave a small child alone with a dog of ANY breed, but especially larger dogs.

Denning & Digging:

Many animals will create a den for themselves to have their young and as a safe escape from the outside weather. Another reason to dig is to catch ground insects or burrowing animals such as moles or gophers.

If you have pride in your garden and want a Malamute... one of those ideas has to go! Malamutes like to dig. They dig to find the cooler dirt under the surface, to catch insects deep in the grass, they dig to escape, and sometimes they seem to dig for the sheer pleasure of it.

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Malamute owners often compare Malamute "landscaping" to the lunar surface or a mine field. These dogs can move large amounts of earth in a very small amount of time. Some Mals may

learn to dig only in "their" area of the yard, but rarely will you teach a Malamute never to dig at all if that is their pleasure.

Most Malamutes crate train readily because of their denning instinct, especially when taught as a young pup. Many often prefer sleeping in their crate to other locations. However, a possible exception may be that favorite spot in the middle of your bed.

Food For Thought:

To survive arctic conditions, a little food must fuel the body for a long distance and/or time. The Malamute metabolism is highly efficient in converting food to fuel. Typically, Mals need much less food to eat than other breeds of similar weight or size. Unless heavily active, it is very easy to overfeed a Malamute to the point of being fat. Depending on the age and activity level, most Mals do best on a "large dog" food with oil added or an "active dog" formula of food.

Alaskan Malamutes are highly food motivated. This is a holdover from the scarcity of food in the arctic. This also means that most Malamutes cannot be trusted around food, as they will steal it when the opportunity arises. The majority of Mals cannot be "free-fed" as they will not stop eating until no more food fits into their stomach. This excessive overeating can lead to a life-threatening condition called "bloat". Mals are very good at begging food and some have developed quite advanced techniques of "mooching" food from their owners.

One benefit of this fixation on food is that Mals do well with motivational training using food as the initial motivator. But... there is a fine line between using food as motivation and your Malamute teaching you to bribe him into obedience!

Coat & Hair:

The Alaskan Malamute's double coat of fur evolved to insulate it from the surrounding environment. The outer guard coat is a coarse medium length, slightly oily to the touch, and is the first layer of defense to repel dirt, snow, or ice. The shorter undercoat is thick dense wool which blocks out the wind or cold. "Woollies" are Malamutes that have a long (often soft) coat. The texture and excessive length of a woolly's coat does not provide good insulation from extreme weather, but it does not hinder them from being good pets.

Malamutes are adaptable to warm climates, but their coat will not be as thick as dogs raised in the cold. In warmer areas, you should not exercise your Malamute during the heat of the day and you need to provide extra water at all times. Mals in very hot temperatures, or not used to the heat, should stay indoors during the day to avoid problems such as heat stroke. It is not recommended to shave a Mal's coat since it also provides some insulation from the heat as well as cold. Very long coats (such as a "woolly") may be cut/trimmed to a more moderate length for easier care.

Twice a year the Malamute sheds its undercoat. A common and more descriptive term is "blowing" coat. The amount of hair lost in a few weeks is staggering and easily fills several garbage bags. In a full "coat blow", the undercoat may actually come out in large clumps of hair. In warm climates, Mals may shed all year long with a heavier shedding period twice a year. If you like a very clean house or do not like dog hair, you should consider another breed.

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Malamutes do not have the strong "doggie" odor often noticed in other breeds. A few may develop a sour smell if the coat is not fully dry after becoming wet. This is due to water trapped within the thick undercoat, which may become a breeding ground for bacteria and the like. Mals take a long time to dry after a bath or swim, even with a high-powered dog dryer. But Malamutes are clean dogs and will groom themselves much as a cat would. Dirt and water that doesn't make it into the undercoat usually comes out with your brushing or their own grooming.

If Dogs Could Talk:

One of the most endearing (and sometimes exasperating) characteristics of the Alaskan Malamute is the fact that they talk. Their "Mala-talk" is usually sounds such as "oowooo", "wroowuf", etc. Be warned, if they talk... they will also "talk back" to you, just as an arguing child would do. Owners may find themselves in a full conversation with their Mals with both parties completely understanding what the other has said.

Malamutes will also howl (or sing, depending on your point of view?). In a group of dogs, this is a form of communication and pack unity. Individually, it may be a call for someone else to communicate with them or to answer a passing siren. Mals may howl when they are happy, just as easily as other breeds howl when they are lonely.

Most Malamutes are not prone to barking. If raised around other dogs that do bark, they may pick up this habit. Even so, their bark is more a combination of a bark/yip and rarely to the amount of excessive barking.

What other Malamute information should I know?

Now that you know a little more about the Alaskan Malamute, you are better able to decide if a Malamute is the right breed for your home. There is still much more to learn about the Alaskan Malamute and it is in your best interest to learn all you can before bringing a Malamute home.

Remember this is a large and physically powerful breed, with a strong will and an independent nature. This is not a breed that you can truly own in the normal sense. But you can form a good lasting relationship with this breed.. provided you are willing to adapt, compromise, be creative, learn as much as possible, and work at a mutual bond of companionship.

But before you make that final decision to bring an Alaskan Malamute into your family, here are a few more topics that you should be interested in researching and reading...

Alaskan Malamute health issues.

General dog, wolf, and pack behavior.

Motivational and clicker training techniques.

Should I choose a breeder or breed rescue?

How to evaluate a breeder or breed rescue.

How to pick a puppy or dog to fit your home.

Puppymills, pet shops, and backyard breeders.

Whatever you eventually decide, whether you get an Alaskan Malamute or not, or choose not to get a dog at all... my best felt wishes to you in making your final decision!