

Want A Malamute?

Great! You've seen them on TV, in the movies, or have been to a dog show or two. Maybe you just met a pair in the park or a puppy in a pet store 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**, 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 ' looks like a wolf? The kids talk you into it? Is that puppy in the window simply the cutest ball of fluff? If you said yes, to any of these questions then do yourself a favor; go to the nearest toy store and buy yourself a stuff toy dog! The Alaskan Malamute is not the dog breed for you!

If you actually took the time to ask yourself "why" you are interested in Malamutes and/or "what" attracted you to this breed, then 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 willing to learn much about this breed of dog. And, you will have a lot to learn with this breed to have a happy relationship!

What do I know about Alaskan Malamutes?

There is a lot of history surrounding the Alaskan Malamute. To understand their history is a start at understanding the breed itself and how to live with a Malamute.

Malamutes were used by the native Alaskans to pull heavy loads in harsh arctic conditions and to hunt food. The arctic demands a "survival of the fittest" attitude, so Malamutes retain much of the pack order instinct.' Intelligence and problem solving were needed to make independent decisions about hazards on the trail, even to the point of disobeying orders from their human companions. Food being scarce, it was of high importance to eat whenever the opportunity arose and to get the most energy out of that food. Malamutes often supplemented their diet with prey caught in the wild. Simply put, they have been physically and mentally molded by their environment for centuries.

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

Personality

The Alaskan Malamute is a very friendly dog with humans. Malamutes are not one-person or one-family dogs. There are very few people they will not like, which make them unsuitable to being good watch or guard dogs. Malamutes get along well with children, especially when raised with them, but caution is always advised due to their size. Although friendly and often sensitive to their owners' moods, Malamutes are highly independent and strong willed.

The adult Malamute may have a quiet and reserved manner, or may be the perpetual child always willing to play. Malamutes do love to be the center of attention and will often demand it. They are alert to their surrounds and curious about the world around them. Malamutes have been 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 Malamutes are content with their place in the pack, while other more dominant Malamutes may challenge their humans for higher pack placement.

With humans this challenge may take the form of the Malamute consistently refusing commands, becoming physically rough or even growling. A grown Malamute cannot be physically forced to obey or respect you, so don't bother using that method with a pup. Early training and a good understanding of the dog behavior can go a long way in keeping a Malamute "in line". Malamutes will respond best to "positive reinforcement" training methods.

Alaskan Malamutes are a dog dominant breed. This means that although a Malamute may never challenge a human over pack order, they certainly will challenge another dog. Same sex challenges (male/male or female/female) can lead to serious fights if the dogs are equally dominant or if one is a younger animal seeking to establish itself.

Intelligence

The Alaskan Malamute is an intelligent breed. And a smart dog will become bored and destructive long before a not-so-smart dog will! Never underestimate how much furniture, carpet, books, even walls! That a Malamute can damage in a small amount of time. Malamutes will choose to "live for the moment" and worry (or not!) about the consequences later.

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

Malamutes can be clownish at times and many possess a sense of humor (dog humor of course!) sometimes resulting in the embarrassment of the owner. They can be quite creative at getting your attention or 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 if motivated. If there is something they want. . . they will find a way to go over, under, around or through any obstacle to get it. Don't be surprised if items disappear from shelves, counters or the top of the refrigerator without any trace of a Malamute passing through.

Active and Working Dogs

The Alaskan Malamute is the equivalent of a long distance runner, and as such, needs plenty of exercise. Many are 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, this means the owner must be very dedicated to providing the proper amount of exercise. Malamutes that are 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, Malamutes also have a tendency to roam the neighborhood or countryside. Never let your Malamute "off-lease" as few are consistently trustworthy to commands (unless they wish to be) 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 (or wolf-hybrids) and killed.

Alaskan Malamutes are still used to pulling people, sleds and heavy loads. Today, these activities are done as pleasure sledding and skijoring, as well as the sports of racing and weight pulling. In warmer climates, many accompany their owners on hikes and backpacking, at carting, bike rides and skating/rollerblading. For the safety of you and your dog,

care must be taken to have your Malamute' properly secured and under control when biking or skating. A very determined Malamute can be hard' enough to stop without having wheels underneath you!

Malamutes have also been trained in search and rescue, agility and therapy work. They are quite adaptable to most activities that are presented to them, love to work, and are good with most people.

Hunting and The Prey Drive

Alaskan Malamutes possess a strong "prey drive" which is part of the hunting instinct, if it moves or squeals, a Malamute will chase it - sometimes with dangerous consequences.

Malamutes have been known to kill rabbits, squirrels and birds, as well as neighborhood cats. Malamutes only do well with cats when they have been raised with them and have also been taught to control their natural instincts. Some Malamutes can never be trusted around other small animals, even when raised with them.

Malamutes should be taught caution and control around children. Besides their love of humans, they are also attracted to children because of the quick movements and high-pitched voices (similar to those of small hurt animals - a natural prey). No small child should be left alone with a large dog of ^v ANY breed. Malamutes tend to play rough and, due to their size and power, could injure a child without meaning to.

Denning and 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 burrowing animals such as moles or gophers.

If you take pride in your garden and want a Malamute . . . one of those ideas has to go! Malamutes like to dig. They dig to get to the cooler dirt under the surface, to catch insects deep in the grass and sometimes they seem to dig for the sheer pleasure of it. Their owners often compare Malamute "landscaping" to the lunar surface or a minefield. Malamutes can move large amounts of earth in a small amount of time. Some Malamutes can be taught to dig only in "their" area of the yard, but rarely can a Malamute be taught to never dig at all.

Because of the denning instinct most Malamutes crate train readily, especially when taught as a young pup. Many often prefer sleeping in their crate to other locations. Although one exception may be the location in the middle of your bed.

Food For Thought

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

Alaskan Malamutes are highly food motivated. This is a holdover from the scarcity of food in the¹ arctic. This also means that most Malamutes cannot be trusted around food as they will steal it when the opportunity arises. The majority of Malamutes cannot be "free-fed" as they will not stop eating until they can't fit any more food into their stomach which can lead to a serious medical condition called bloat. Malamutes are very good at begging for food and some have developed quite advanced techniques of "mooching" food from their owners.

One benefit of this fixation on food is that Malamutes 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 and Hair

The Alaskan Malamute's double coat of fur has 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 a thick dense wool which blocks out the wind or cold. "Woolies" 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 the 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 it is not advised to exercise your Malamute during the heat of the day and to provide extra water at all times. Malamutes in very hot temperatures, or that are not used to the

heat, should be kept indoors during the day to avoid problems such as heat stroke. It is not recommended to shave a Malamute's coat since it provides some insulation from heat as well as cold. Very long coats (such as a woolly's) may be cut/trimmed to a more moderate length.

Twice a year the Malamute will shed its undercoat. A more common term is "blowing" coat. The amount of hair lost in a few weeks is staggering and can fill several garbage bags. In a full "blow" the undercoat may actually come out in many large clumps of hair. In warm climates, Malamutes 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.

Malamutes do not have the strong "doggie" odor which may be noticed in other breeds. A few may develop a sour smell if the coat is not fully dried after being wet. This is due to water being trapped within the undercoat and allowing a breeding ground for bacteria and the like. Malamutes are clean dogs and will groom themselves much as a cat would. Dirt and water that does not make it into the undercoat will usually come out under 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 "oowoo", "roowuf", etc. Be warned, if they talk . . . they will also "talk back" to you just as an arguing child would. Owners have often found themselves in full conversation with their Malamutes and both parties understanding what is being 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. Singularly, it may be a call for someone to communicate with or to answer a passing siren. Malamutes will howl when they are happy 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 information on Alaskan Malamutes do I need to know?

Now that you know a little more about the Alaskan Malamute, you will be better able to decide if a Malamute is a breed you can live with. 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 into your home.

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