

CONSUMER ADVISORY

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By Attorney General Tom Miller

Choosing and Buying the Right Pet

One of the most personal decisions you can make is adding a pet to your life. Finding the right pet that's a good fit for both you and the animal is sometimes a matter of luck, and is often a matter of asking the right questions. It should always be a long-term commitment of time, money and caring.

First, decide where you will look:

- **Animal rescue groups and shelters:** Consider adopting a pet from your local nonprofit (501(c)3) animal rescue group or animal shelter. As long as the organization has adequate facilities and resources, you're likely to find a healthy animal at a nominal cost. Nonprofit shelters often have good selections, staff and volunteers who love animals, and the animals are generally in good health. They also provide spaying and neutering. Animal rescue groups and shelters may not have pedigreed papers or extensive background histories on most of its animals, including behaviors, medical conditions and past abuse. Reputable animal rescue groups may also ask personal questions of potential owners or require them to sign agreements to ensure a good home for adoptable pets.
- **Pet breeders:** Independent breeders often specialize in specific breeds. To find a reputable breeder, do some research beyond a breeder's website. Talk with veterinarians, local dog or cat clubs, references, and avoid "discount" breeder ads. You should expect to pay higher prices for animals from good breeders. If you are buying a purebred pet, the breeder should provide paperwork, including breed registration and medical records. Be wary of breeders who claim to have vaccinated their animals in-house. Without proper documentation, you may be required to re-vaccinate. They should also provide you with sale contracts that protect you should the animal you purchased have a preexisting condition or any genetic diseases. Responsible breeders will provide you good contact information and their location.
- **Pet stores:** While there are established, reputable pet stores, be cautious about buying pets from a retail store. Some stores seeking low prices will buy from so-called "puppy mill" suppliers. These suppliers tend to produce offspring with chronic behavioral and medical problems. A pet store buying from a breeder may not have information about an animal's background and medical history. Ask the store about its suppliers and what, if any information, it can provide about a prospective pet. Be sure to ask about the store's return policy.

When you purchase a pet (or even before you buy, if the seller will allow it), take it to a veterinarian. The veterinarian will examine the animal, assess its overall health, and ensure the animal has received the needed shots.

If the veterinarian finds medical problems, ask the veterinarian to provide you with a letter of explanation that includes whether the condition is a preexisting condition or genetic disease. Contact the seller and provide the veterinarian's letter. If seller doesn't respond, send a certified letter explaining the problem and request that they take financial responsibility. You can file a complaint with the Iowa Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division, the Better Business Bureau, or pursue a case through small claims court.

If you suspect that a pet you observed or purchased was subjected to neglect or animal cruelty, contact law enforcement, an animal control unit, or an animal rescue organization. To file a complaint against an animal rescue facility, dealer, shelter, breeder (with four or more sexually intact adult cats or dogs), or a pet store, file a complaint with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's Animal Welfare Bureau at www.iowaAgriculture.gov (click on the Animals tab, then the Animal Industry Bureau) or call 515-281-6358.

To file a consumer complaint or get more information, contact the Iowa Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division, Hoover Bldg., Des Moines, IA 50319. Call 515-281-5926, or outside Des Moines call toll-free at 1-888-777-4590. Our website is: www.iowaAttorneyGeneral.gov.