

OWNING A SWISSY
By Catherina Caspers

Hi, we got our first Swissy last year so I still have a lot of 'fresh' memory of swissies. We actually just moved from Ascot in the UK to South Africa! I will jump right in: there are a few swissies in England and even less breeders so it is hard to find a breeder and get the actual puppy as waiting lists can be long (but definitely worth it). Swissies hate to be alone and they like to be involved in everything and anything and would pretty much do anything just to be with you and would prefer to be with you over most things. We were lucky and have two other dogs which keep Casper company so he doesn't feel lonely and someone is usually home but as long as you crate train your dog and exercise him etc they should be okay being alone for a while. Some swissies take an extremely long time to house train, almost a year in some cases, but with Casper it took us only about 2 weeks and we haven't had an accident since he was about 4 months old (he is 1 now), but we could just be extremely lucky, you must be prepared for a very strict housetraining schedule and months of peeing and pooping inside. Swissies are active dogs but are also lazy which makes them great because their active when needed and can lounge around for hours too, we find an hour long walk a day is perfect for ours although Casper can go longer/shorter. However they do not do well in heat and you must be careful of heatstroke, although its unlikely in england! They are a versatile breed, surprisingly agile, and love doing stuff especially hiking etc. We find Casper is very protective but has a much bigger bark than bite and is just a scary looking wimp, so if you want a guard dog I wouldn't suggest a swissy as they are big cowards! However, I have no doubt that Casper would defend us if necessary, but only in an extreme circumstance. If you don't like a dog who is all in your face, on your lap, crawling on you and basically thinks there a tiny lapdog, a swissy is not for you. Casper would love to be carried around if he could be! You need to be able to buy lots of excellent, human grade dog food, swissies have lots of allergies and very sensitive tummies, the only thing that has worked for us is raw feeding which we just recently began. You will need to try out a lot of foods to find the right thing, also big pups need low protein food so they don't grow too quick as it is bad for their joints. For the first year you need to be very careful with too much exercise, slippery floors, too much protein etc as they are growing and their joints etc are very easily damaged. Swissies are very prone to common big dog problems as well as; bloat, hip/elbow dysplasia, incontinence in females, lickfit and are also prone to epilepsy and generally have quite short life spans (10 years or so) but for a dog their size it is actually relatively long, compared to their close relatives Bernese which average 6 years nowadays. You need to be really careful with choosing a well bred pup if you want a healthy dog! Another thing is they shed- a lot more than we originally thought they would. Regular brushing & good food reduces it but not a lot, so if you like a neat house and can't handle lots of hair then don't get a swissy- don't let the short hair fool you, it is very thick. Swissies are amazing with children and are very friendly dogs but they can be wary of strangers so if you want a dog that loves everybody and will immediately be friends with everyone they meet, swissies aren't for you. They are suspicious of strangers and must sniff them and watch them for a bit before deciding they are okay (especially men, with women Casper is best friends with them immediately). They are very clumsy so can knock people down easily as

well as belongings. Some swissies can be dog aggressive although Casper is very much not dog aggressive, so it depends. The key is socialisation from day 1 with everyone, everything and every place. Socialisation and early training is essential with such large, big, strong willed dogs. Swissies are very, very loyal, loving, cuddly, goofy, funny, silly, happy and just wonderful dogs which make you laugh and smile so much its incredible. They just brighten up the room when they come in, they are always smiling unless their sleeping and they have so many strange quirks it is hilarious. Swissies suit mainly active, fun loving, kind and patient owners. They are not the smartest dogs on the block (at least Casper isn't) but they are definitely not stupid, they respond best to calm kind patient training rather than yelling and forcefulness as they are very sensitive dogs. They truly are wonderful dogs for the right people. They are definitely not perfect but they are worth it. As long as you put in enough time, love, training, socialisation and care you will have an amazing dog (regardless of breed). Swissies are WORK, they are not an easy breed, they demand attention. Sometimes they can be absolutely crazy hyper and other times they are so unbelievably calm, gentle and quiet, it fluctuates a lot. For the first 2-3 years of their lives they will still be puppies, they won't listen all the time, they might drive you crazy, they will be energetic and excitable and they will be annoying once in a while but your training has to be calm and consistent and you will make it through the dreaded adolescent phase and into the lovely, calm, well mannered adult phase. I think prior experience with dogs is important but not necessary as long as you do enough preparation and work when you have the dog. As puppies they are often angelic and then turn into nightmares as 'teenagers'. These dogs love to PULL, so from day one you have to teach them to heel. From as young as 10 weeks they should be being leash trained to not pull because by the time your little puppy is 6 months old they will already be very strong and big. These dogs grow literally overnight, I swear on my life that when we took Casper out of his crate in the morning he would be bigger than the night before, your puppy will grow from tiny puppy size to Labrador size in a few months and then reach Rottie size in another couple of months and then reach adult swissy size very, very quickly. The hard thing to remember is this huge, heavy dog is still a puppy with a puppy brain and puppy manners all wrapped into a big dog which means you have to treat him kindly because he is still a 'baby'. But this also means from day 1 you have to teach him rules which will continue into adulthood, you cannot just change the rules when he starts getting bigger, you need to be consistent. This means from day 1, no jumping up, no pulling on leash etc, etc. Socialisation is the most important thing, letting him meet everything strange and scary in the world so he learns how to handle scary situations and be calm in new places and meeting new people. This needs to be done from a very early age as they socialisation period ends, I think (although I am not sure) at under 4 months old. So even though he hasn't got all his shots, you should try to take him to lots of 'safe' places and carry him around busy areas and let him meet vaccinated dogs and new people etc but making sure to stay away from strange dogs etc. You should try to meet some swissies before deciding on getting one as they are much bigger in real life haha and you may not actually like their character in person, although I doubt it as they are so lovely. This is all I can think of at the moment, but good luck! You should look up "Springhaze swiss mountain dogs", which is where we got Casper.

If you are weak willed, give up easily, lazy, obsessed with a clean house and don't love to be literally showered with affection (by showered I mean slobbered on) then you wouldn't suit a swissy. You need a lot of time on your hands, these dogs take up a lot of your life but they deserve it. Swissies need a firm but gentle leader who gives them lots and lots and lots of love and affection (I have never seen a dog so obsessed with being cuddled as Casper) but still gives them rules, training and exercise. You also need to be prepared for being asked lots of questions about your dog and constantly being stared at etc either by people who are in love with your beautiful Bernese cross or by people who are terrified of such a big beast (although compared to some dogs, Casper seems tiny, but heyho)- so if your shy etc then these dogs aren't great as they attract a lot of attention because they are so beautiful. They do slobber as well just a warning, not a lot and only when hot or drinking or extremely excited or hungry but they do have a wet mouth and can slobber on you. These dogs are expensive, the bigger the more expensive, and the more mess they make. Swissies are a lot bigger and more difficult than Labradors I would say, so you would definitely need help via a training class or trainer. Casper has been very easy for us, excellent house training, never chewed up anything and listens well for a 'teenager' but that may just be ours. It does depend on the dog though but from what I've heard/seen swissies are quite similar to each other. The most important thing of all for swissies is just being around them even if you aren't paying attention to them. They are most comfortable and peaceful when all of their family are around them. They are such a protective, watchful breed they just like to be able to watch over everyone all the time- they are like guardians. A swissy is most suited to people who try to bring them with everywhere whenever they can and can spend a lot of time with them.