

The Iditarod and Its Health Impact on Dogs:

Studies Show Acute and Chronic Physiological Risks to Dogs Run in Endurance Races

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JANUARY 20, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Participants in Alaska's Iditarod race, a long-distance mushing competition, compel dogs to run for multiple days under harsh conditions. Research shows that the extraordinary amount of physical exertion endured by the dogs has harmful effects on their health, causing them to suffer from various ailments and hardships, including gastrointestinal diseases and orthopedic injuries, and, in some instances, to die. The conditions in which dogs are kept when not used in endurance races, such as daily exposure to harsh weather, prolonged tethering, and crowded dog yards that can lead to disease or parasite infections, also affect dogs' overall well-being and long-term health. This report presents a synthesis of findings from a diverse collection of recent peer-reviewed studies, which point to the need to end forced endurance races like the Iditarod.

BACKGROUND

Every March, Iditarod mushers make hundreds of dogs run up to 100 miles per day in freezing temperatures on icy trails and through high winds, blizzards, and other extreme weather conditions. The race takes place over two weeks, and its trail, which alternates between two routes every year, is approximately **1,000** miles long. Up to half the dogs who start the race do not finish due to illness, injuries, exhaustion, and other causes, leaving the rest to have to work even harder. While mushers start the race with up to 16 dogs, they are allowed to finish it with as few as five.

More than 150 dogs have died while running the Iditarod, including three young ones in 2024 and a dog in a late stage of pregnancy in 2025. Many who make it to the finish line are left with bloody paws, gastrointestinal issues, or other health conditions.

Previous studies have shown that the Iditarod and other endurance races have severe health impacts on dogs. A study published in the *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine* in 2002 reported that more than 80% of the dogs who finished the Iditarod sustained persistent lung damage. In 2003, a study in the *Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine* showed that dogs used in endurance racing had a 61% higher rate of stomach erosions or ulcers. In a paper published in 2005 in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, researchers concluded that dogs used in sled races suffer from airway dysfunction similar to “ski asthma” (an asthma-like condition caused by intense exercise in cold weather) that persists even after four months of rest. This paper will examine whether recent studies from 2016 to 2024 continue to report findings pointing to harmful health impacts on dogs.

If they were elite athletes
that can handle the stress of
endurance racing, why would
they get bleeding stomach
ulcers? Why would their
hormones be suppressed and
their immune system ruined?
Why would their internal organs
and their musculoskeletal
system fail?

—Dr. Paula Kislak, board president of
the Humane Society Veterinary
Medical Association





FINDINGS FROM RECENT STUDIES AND ON-SITE INVESTIGATION

Dogs used in the race face extreme physical stress that leads to severe health conditions and even death. A 2024 study conducted by the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Colorado State University, and Oklahoma State University evaluated the illnesses and injuries documented during three years of the Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race, a race in Alaska and Canada that, like the Iditarod, traversed over 1,000 miles. Three hundred and sixty-five dogs—more than half the dogs who were entered into the race—were hurt or became ill, including 156 who sustained orthopedic injuries. Over 40% of the dogs diagnosed with an injury or other ailment were forced to finish the race. The study found that dogs used for endurance racing develop “athletic heart syndrome,” a condition in which their hearts become misshapen, affecting blood flow, and “sled dog myopathy”—in which their muscles break down and release protein into their bloodstreams, putting their hearts, kidneys, and other organs at risk. A primary cause of sudden death in dogs used in these races is aspiration pneumonia, in which dogs inhale their own vomit.

The development of gastritis (inflammation of the stomach lining) among these dogs is so common that administering daily medication to reduce their stomach acid is now standard racing practice. Even so, many dogs still end up with painful digestive conditions. A 2023 study published in the *Journal of Small Animal Practice* showed that by the end of a 2019 race in which nine dogs pulled loaded sleds for 263 miles over two days, all had intestinal lesions. Nearly 90% of the dogs also developed stomach lesions, over 40% had diarrhea, and all but two had ingested “gravel, straw or other foreign materials.”

Most dogs who develop exercise-induced gastritis show no clinical signs of the disease until it becomes life-threatening or kills them. Almost half of the 23 dogs who died in one period involving 13 Iditarod races succumbed to gastritis. A Norwegian University of Life Sciences study from 2020 found that dogs’ bacterial levels change while racing as their gastrointestinal tracts struggle to maintain stability. Additionally, a 2016 study by Oklahoma State University in partnership with Purina Animal Nutrition revealed that many dogs suffer long after “ultra-endurance” races, including from chronic inflammation, for up to four months.

Dogs lose essential electrolytes due to excessive salivation.

According to a 2020 study published in *Physiological Reports*, electrolytes—which play important roles in nerve and muscle function—are not replenished if a dog runs for hours, placing dogs at higher risk for injuries and ailments. The study focused on dogs used in sled races because, instead of thermoregulating through panting, they primarily lose electrolytes through salivating while racing under extreme cold-weather conditions. During this study, dogs had free access to water as needed; however, dogs used in endurance races are not permitted to stop running when they choose. The study notes that, just as with humans, dehydration induced by exercise negatively impacts dogs' health and well-being.

In 2017, the Norwegian Scientific Committee for Food Safety's Panel on Animal Health and Welfare assessed common hazards and risks for dogs kept outdoors and used in sled races. The paper identified common hazards experienced by the dogs, including daily exposure to harsh weather, prolonged tethering, and disease or parasite infections related to crowded, dirty dog yards. Dogs used in races face dehydration from diarrhea, panting/salivating, and hypothermia or hyperthermia. The authors also criticized race guidelines' insufficient times for dogs to rest—noting that lack of rest is a significant hazard because it can lead to fatigue and even fatalities—and inadequate veterinary tests at checkpoints.

In late 2018 and early 2019, a PETA eyewitness worked at dog yards owned by former Iditarod champions and found widespread neglect and suffering. It's standard practice to keep dogs used for sledding chained up outside when not racing. At one site operated by a former Iditarod champion, the dogs' only respite from a wind chill as low as minus 19 degrees Fahrenheit (-28°C) was dilapidated, uninsulated boxes, some of which had even collapsed, containing little, if any, straw. At three-time Iditarod champion Mitch Seavey's dog yard, the eyewitness found scores of dogs continuously chained to barrels. Some had run in circles for so long that their paw pads were worn down or raw. When a team of dogs broke free from a sled, one dog was dragged to death while another was dragged for up to 2.5 miles and left urinating blood. Some dogs' tongues froze to metal harness lines and the skin was torn off, while others' footpads bled profusely. No veterinarian examined or treated these dogs' injuries.





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The ... warehousing of dogs—where for most of their lives the dogs are denied everything natural to them, isolated from each other, their bodies exposed to extremes of weather, day in and day out, intermittently raced to the limits that their bodies can endure and beyond, and then disposed of when injured, ill or old—is at odds with legitimate dog care and societal attitudes everywhere in the Western world. Yet somehow this suffering becomes a legally acceptable ‘industry standard’ when someone stands to profit from this abuse.

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—Debi Zimmermann, B.Sc., D.V.M.

CONCLUSION

Research provides ample evidence that the physical strain placed on dogs used in long-distance sled races, such as the Iditarod, severely impacts their health and often results in great suffering and even death. These races require that dogs run for many hours at a time across dangerous terrain and in extreme weather conditions, often for days in a row with inadequate rest. The toll this takes on their bodies is well-documented, and they are exposed to numerous hazards. The most widely reported ailments experienced by dogs made to run for hours on consecutive days are gastrointestinal lesions and orthopedic injuries. Many dogs suffer from dehydration and loss of electrolytes while racing, both from excessive salivation and stress-induced diarrhea.

Nearly all the studies on the ramifications to dogs' health during ultra-endurance races use data collected before, during, and immediately after the event. Industry standards for living conditions when the dogs aren't being raced include daily exposure to harsh weather, tethering for long periods of time, and disease or infections due to dog yards that may be crowded and insufficiently cleaned. Dogs' overall well-being and long-term health outcomes are also likely to be significantly affected by the conditions they live in when not being exploited for endurance races.

Mushers force dogs to run even when they're exhibiting symptoms of illness, causing some of them to develop serious, life-threatening conditions that affect their hearts and other major organs. These findings point to the need to end forced endurance races like the Iditarod.

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