Maintaining a healthy weight for your dog

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WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR YOUR DOG TO MAINTAIN AN IDEAL BODY WEIGHT?

Being overweight seriously impairs your dog's quality of life as well as its life expectancy. Dogs with an above healthy bodyweight are at greater risk of developing several debilitating diseases and it may shorten their lifespan for up to two years compared with healthy weight dogs.

OVERWEIGHT IS NOT A HEALTHY CONDITION AND IT OPENS THE DOOR TO A LOT OF MEDICAL CONCERNS

Overweight in dogs:

- Reduces their quality of life (joint pain and decreased mobility, lower heat tolerance)
- Reduces their life span
- Increases difficulty with routine clinical and surgical procedures at the vet clinic
- Increases anaesthetic risk

Overweight in dogs is related to, or worsens:

- Orthopaedic disorders
- Heart and respiratory disease
- Pancreatitis
- Diabetes mellitus
- Some skin disorders
- Some types of cancer

WHAT IS AN IDEAL BODY WEIGHT?

An ideal body weight is one which is appropriate for your dog's breed, age and body frame (size). Each dog will have their own ideal body weight and maintaining this weight is important for overall health. Regular body weight recording on a weighing scale is a very sensitive method of monitoring weight change over time. Measuring body weight has the advantages of being quick, easy, repeatable, and objective, but it cannot be used alone to assess body composition as it does not distinguish different tissue types, for example, fat from muscle.

Body condition scoring, in addition to body weight measurement, is a quick method that considers your pet's shape and any layers of fat over their contours, to give you an idea of whether they are under, at ideal, or overweight. You will find the WSAVA Body Condition Score (BCS) method in this factsheet. Using the Body Condition Scoring system takes practice, and it is therefore advised to consult your veterinarian for guidance and for their assessment too.

BODY CONDITION SCORING SYSTEM

Body Condition Score Chart, wsava.org

- **Optimal Body Weight (BCS 4-5/9):** Your dog is at ideal body weight, maintain this condition. If the weight changes, seek your veterinarian's advice.
- **Underweight (below BCS 4/9):** Your dog is underweight and needs your help to gain some weight to ensure optimal health. Seek your veterinarian's advice.
- **Overweight (BCS 6-7/9):** Your dog is overweight, and this affects its quality of life. Your dog needs to lose weight to get back to optimal health. Seek your veterinarian's advice.
- **Obese (BCS 8-9/9):** Your dog is seriously overweight and has an impaired quality of life. Your dog needs to lose weight to get back to optimal health. Seek your veterinarian's advice.

MONITOR YOUR DOG'S BODY CONDITION AND BODY WEIGHT REGULARLY

Start to assess your dog's body condition early in your dog's life, even during growth. Seeing your dog every day can impair your perception, which makes detecting over or underweight challenging. This underscores the importance of regularly monitoring your dog's weight using a scale as well as body condition scoring. It is much easier to help your dog maintain a lifelong ideal weight, if the feeding amount is adjusted based on minor weight changes, compared with having to undergo a full weight loss program when your dog becomes visually overweight (BCS 6/9 or above).

Be particularly careful with puppies. Overfeeding puppies may result in fast growth, putting them at risk of growth disturbances as well as being overweight for life. You can monitor their growth rate using growth charts, available from your veterinarian.

RISK FACTORS FOR OVERWEIGHT IN DOGS

Risk factors affecting the number of calories your dog needs per day:

Sex: Female dogs have a higher risk of obesity compared with entire male dogs. Neutered males have a similarly increased risk.

TIPS ON TREATS, CHEWS AND TABLE SCRAPS

- **Ration the daily treat and chew allowance**
- **Use part of the dog´s main food as treats if possible**
- **Use small treats. A cookie may be a small treat for a human, but it is a large treat for a dog**
- **Avoid high calorie treats or table scraps**

Neutering: When a dog is neutered, the production of the hormones oestrogen and testosterone decreases. As this can affect the dog's ability to feel full and they may eat more, this can increase the risk of becoming overweight.

Age: Increasing age may reduce your dog's mobility and activity level and diet adjustments may be necessary to avoid weight gain.

Inactivity: Inactivity decreases your dog's energy needs. Exercise your dog daily.

Post Weight Loss: Dogs that have been overweight in the past are prone to becoming overweight again, so care should be taken with feeding amounts. Keep a close eye to prevent weight creeping back on.

Risk factors affecting how much your dog eats:

Breed and Individuals: Dogs of some breeds, such as Labrador retrievers, may be more prone to weight gain either because they are very food motivated or are less inclined to exercise.

Diet Choice: Dogs might eat too much energy if the chosen diet does not provide adequate satiety. Therefore it is important to choose a diet with the calorie content adjusted to the dog's life-stage (e.g. puppy or senior) and lifestyle (e.g. activity level). 'Light' diets and veterinary weight loss diets have a lower calorie content compared to regular diets, but have increased nutrients to ensure that your dog still gets adequate nutrition, despite a lower calorie intake. The increased fibre and protein content found in these types of food can help with fullness, and meal sizes can be bigger. However, if kibbles are too small, dogs might eat too quickly, consuming too much energy before satiety signals have time to take effect.

Your veterinarian or dog nutritionist can help you choose an appropriate diet for your dog.

Feeding enrichment provides physical and mental stimulation for your dog – increasing the time spent on ingesting the food.

Feeding Management: Dogs are typically not good at regulating their food intake when fed ad libitum (free availability of food) and it is not recommended for the obese prone dogs. Twice-daily feeding may help protect against weight gain compared with once a day feeding.

Furthermore, measuring the feeding amount with a scoop or cup is imprecise and it may be tempting to top a little bit extra when reaching the allocated mark. Weighing the food provides a more precise feeding amount.

Feeding Enrichment: Feeding enrichment provides physical and mental stimulation for the dog and it increases the time spent on ingesting the food, possibly improving satiation. Feed dry food or treats in puzzles, smear wet food to increase licking time, play hide and seek or other games that activates your dog and strengthens your bond with your dog.

Treats and Chews: Giving treats is an integral part of training activities and supports bonding with your dog. Chewing is a natural behaviour for dogs and supports their wellbeing. However, it is important to keep in mind that most treats and chews provide your dog with additional calories, just like human snacks. Therefore, treats and chews should never comprise more than 10% of your dog's daily energy needs.

Table Scraps: Feeding table scraps is another source for additional calories. It can stimulate begging behaviour that may be hard to ignore. Calories from table scraps must be included in the 10% allowance mentioned above. Ensure table scraps are not toxic for dogs or likely to cause tummy upset.

HOW TO AVOID UNWANTED WEIGHT GAIN IN YOUR DOG

It is very important to avoid weight gain because it is much easier to gain weight than to lose it .

- Monitor your dog's weight and Body Condition Score – weigh on scales whenever possible, preferably monthly, and adjust your feeding practices accordingly.
- Feed an appropriate life-stage diet, so that the calorie content is adapted to your dog's age. Puppies need more calories for their growth while senior dogs may need fewer calories.
- Reduce your dog's feeding amount following neutering.
- Keep your dog in good physical condition – plan exercise and physical activities adjusted to your dog's individual ability for at least ½ hour per day.
- Adjust your dog's diet according to activity level - if your dog's mobility decreases, you should cut down the feeding amount.
- Measure your dog's feeding amount on a scale – there is a greater risk of overfeeding when using cups or other volume estimates.
- The total daily number of treats, chews and table scraps should never amount to more than 10% of your dog's daily calorie need, and make sure to decrease the amount of its main meal accordingly.
- Carefully follow the feeding instructions when changing to a new food and monitor your dog's weight and body condition score following the transition.
- A wet diet or soaking the dry diet may improve satiety in some dogs.

WHAT WEIGHT OF FOOD CONTAINS 10 KILOCALORIES (KCAL) (WHICH EQUALS 42 KJ)? USE THE CHART BELOW FOR SELECTED TREATS AND FOODS

	Grams of Food Containing 10 kcal (= 42 kJ)
Courgette/Zucchini (Cooked/Raw)	43 g
Green Beans (Cooked)	33 g
Broccoli (Cooked)	26 g
Carrots (Cooked/Raw)	24 g
Potatoes (Cooked)	13 g
Full Fat Milk Yoghurt	14 g
Tuna in Brine	10 g
Ham with Fat and Rind	7 g
Hard-Boiled Egg	7 g
Petit Suisse Cheese	7 g
Tuna in Oil	4 g
Frankfurter Sausage	4 g
Camembert	3 g
Buttered Bread	3 g
Liver Pâté	3 g
Emmenthal Cheese	3 g
Cookies	2 g

HOW MUCH ENERGY IS 10% OF OVERALL DAILY ENERGY FOR DIFFERENT WEIGHTS OF DOGS IN IDEAL BODY CONDITION? USE THIS SIMPLE CHART

Optimal Bodyweight of Your Dog	10% Daily Energy Requirement (DER) Measured in kcals *	10% Daily Energy Requirement (DER) Measured in kJs *
2 kg	16 kcal	67 kJ
4 kg	27 kcal	113 kJ
6 kg	36 kcal	151 kJ
8 kg	45 kcal	188 kJ
10 kg	53 kcal	222 kJ
15 kg	72 kcal	301 kJ
20 kg	90 kcal	377 kJ
25 kg	106 kcal	444 kJ
35 kg	137 kcal	574 kJ
40 kg	151 kcal	632 kJ
50 kg	179 kcal	749 kJ

** Using the equation 10% x 95 kcal x $BW^{0.75}$ and converted in kJ: kcal x 4.1868*

HOW TO OBTAIN A HEALTHY WEIGHT IF MY DOG IS OVERWEIGHT

If your dog is already overweight (BCS 6/9 or above), you can help it by engaging in a weight loss program and your veterinarian can guide you on how to plan and manage this successfully. The closer to the healthy weight when you start, the easier it is. Because daily calories will have to be significantly decreased, your dog will have to be switched to a balanced weight loss diet, where the nutrient content is increased to accommodate the lower calorie intake. Furthermore, these diets often contain increased protein and/or fibre, which helps your dog feel full, despite the lower calorie content.

FURTHER READING

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