

MU Guide

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Feeding The Dog

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Although feeding a dog would seem to be a relatively simple matter, the science of canine nutrition is still a field of intense study and research. The work of nutritionists has led to commercially available diets of extremely high quality. These diets, if used properly, can significantly add to the health and longevity of your dog.

A dog's dietary requirements change depending on its stage of life, activity level and physiologic state. For instance, a growing puppy requires high levels of many nutrients, like protein, to develop strong bones and muscles. Older dogs do not require nearly as much protein; in fact, high-protein diets can over-tax body organs such as the kidneys and actually shorten the dog's life.

Recently, it has been discovered that many diseases in dogs dramatically alter nutritional requirements. Many diets are now available that have been developed specifically for ill or aging dogs. In many instances, these special diets can be the single most important factor in treating the disease.

High-quality diets do not ensure that dogs will remain healthy. It is up to dog owners to feed dogs properly and observe them closely for any indication of a problem. The leading preventable condition that has a profound effect on their health, well being and life span is obesity. It has been estimated that as many as half of all the pet dogs in the United States are overweight.

This publication is intended to help dog owners understand how and what to feed their dogs to give them the greatest chance of long and healthy lives. It is not just the length of the dog's life, but the quality of life for both the dog and its owner that is important.

The dog's status in the household has changed dramatically over the years. Dogs have risen from simple utility animals and guardians of livestock and property to the point where many consider them a part of the family. Thus to many owners, maintaining

a happy, healthy dog has become even more important. Even the working or breeding dog can perform better if it receives the nutrition it requires.

Since our understanding of nutrition is constantly changing and each dog has its own individual dietary needs, the information in this publication should only be used as a guideline. Specific questions not covered here should be directed to your veterinarian.

Water

Free access to fresh water at all times is essential for dogs. A dog can get ill and die quickly from dehydration if access is denied. High temperatures, exercise and conditions such as lactation, diarrhea and certain diseases dramatically increase the dog's water requirement. A rough estimate of the maintenance requirement for the dog is approximately 1 ounce of water per pound of body weight per day. An otherwise healthy-appearing dog that is drinking three or more times this amount of water may have a disease, such as diabetes or kidney failure, and should be examined by a veterinarian.

Supplements

Commercially available diets are the best thing to feed the dog. They should not be supplemented, except for dogs with certain conditions. Adding more vitamins, minerals, fats or proteins can be harmful unless the animal is not getting enough of these nutrients. You should always check with your veterinarian before supplementing a diet.

Table scraps

Many people who feel that dogs need variety in their diets feed table scraps in addition to the regular diet. This is not recommended. Dogs are not people and are perfectly content to eat the same thing every

day. Feeding table scraps can encourage the dog to become picky or finicky. Many table scraps can upset a dog's digestive tract and cause vomiting or diarrhea. This is especially true of spicy or fatty foods. In fact, fatty foods can induce a life-threatening disease called pancreatitis in susceptible dogs. Many adult dogs cannot digest milk products and will develop diarrhea if given them.

If table scraps are fed, they should make up less than one-fourth of the total food intake. Scraps should also be a mixture of foods similar to what you would eat for a meal — plenty of vegetables and not just meat scraps.

Homemade diets

Diets that have been formulated for dogs are a precise mixture of many ingredients designed to give an optimum balance of nutrients. Homemade diets are difficult to formulate accurately and usually have excesses and deficiencies that can affect the dog's health. They are difficult to make and store and usually cost more than commercial diets.

If you want to formulate a homemade diet, recipes are available through your veterinarian that will give you the best chance to create a balanced ration.

Weaning and feeding the puppy

The process of weaning a puppy should begin at three to four weeks and be complete by six to eight weeks. Mix a small amount of puppy food with milk or milk replacer to the consistency of soup. Offer this to the puppy in a shallow tray. Initially, it may help to place the puppy's feet in the mixture and allow him to lick it off until he learns what it is. Gradually add less and less milk to the mixture until by six to eight weeks the puppy is eating solid food. Remember, weaning is often a messy process. The puppy should be allowed to develop cleaner habits at his own pace. That is, allow the puppy to be a puppy.

Puppies have large nutritional requirements but small stomachs. They need to eat about six times a day in order to get the amount of food they need to develop properly. By the time they are 6 months old, they only need to eat two or three times per day. An adult dog only needs to eat once a day. The food fed to the puppy must be labeled as puppy food. Adult dog food does not have the proper amounts of vital nutrients that the puppy needs.

A notable exception to the puppy-food-only rule is the large or giant-breed puppy. Many nutritionists feel that developmental bone problems, such as hip dysplasia, may be due to puppies growing too rapidly. They recommend mixing puppy food and adult dog food together to slow this rate of growth. For this reason, among others, puppy diets should

not be supplemented or overfed in an effort to increase the growth rate. If fed properly, a dog will reach its ideal adult size; any effort to increase the adult size by supplementing the puppy will lead to an unhealthy dog.

Feeding the adult dog

Different breeds of dogs reach adulthood at different times. Toy or miniature breeds can be fully grown in as little as eight to 10 months, whereas giant breeds may require 18 months or longer. Many dogs continue to mature for another year or two.

A rule of thumb is that the amount of time that it takes for the dog to stop growing in height is about as much additional time as it will require to fully mature. Since the dog is no longer growing as quickly as when it was a puppy, it no longer requires the nutrient-rich puppy food. The dog should now be switched to an adult dog food. Continued feeding of a puppy food promotes obesity and other health problems.

In general, smaller-breed dogs require more food per pound of body weight than larger-breed dogs. For example, a 100-pound Labrador Retriever may weigh 10 times as much as a terrier but only require six times as much food. As mentioned, adult dogs usually only need to eat once daily. Some smaller breeds may do better if fed twice daily.

What to feed

The choice of what to feed is obviously up to the individual owner. The choices available are canned food, semi-moist foods and dry foods. All three types are nutritionally the same and are complete rations by themselves. Canned foods are three-fourths water and thus cost more for the same amount of nutrients. Likewise, semi-moist foods require special processing and packaging, which add to the cost. Dry foods are the most cost-effective and require the least amount of storage space. Dogs do perfectly well eating only dry dog foods.

Once the type of food has been decided, you should not change back and forth. Pick one type (or types) and one brand and stick with it. Changing from different types or brands of dog food can upset the dog's system and lead to vomiting or diarrhea.

How much to feed

Each dog is an individual requiring its own certain amount of food to maintain optimum body condition. The feeding charts and guidelines supplied by the dog food manufacturer are only rough estimates. The amount that any individual dog requires may be more or less than recommended. Obviously, working

dogs, dogs that get a lot of exercise, pregnant and lactating dogs require substantially more food.

The dog owner must be able to determine how much is the proper amount for their particular dog. Although it seems obvious that undernutrition and starvation are bad for the dog, overnutrition and obesity can be just as bad for the dog's health and are much more common. Once a dog becomes overweight, it can be very difficult to get it back to its ideal weight.

Puppies should gain weight steadily but not be allowed to get fat. An adult dog should be well muscled but not obese. A good rule of thumb is that you should not be able to see the dog's ribs, but you should be able to feel them under the skin by lightly running your hands along its sides. If you are unable to feel the ribs, or have to push in to feel them, the dog is overweight.

Many people feel that an overweight dog is a happy dog. This is not true! Obesity is extremely damaging to a dog and greatly reduces its life expectancy and quality of life. Obesity decreases immune function, stresses the heart and lungs, damages the joints and increases the risk for certain types of cancer. It is not kind to overfeed a dog; it is cruel and unhealthy.

Feeding habits

Eating habits, like many other habits, begin early in life. Beginning at weaning, the dog should be offered food, given a set amount of time to eat (15 minutes is sufficient), then the food should be removed until the next scheduled feeding. Dogs should not be given access to food all the time. This promotes obesity and may cause the dog to become finicky.

One of the first signs that a dog may be ill is that its appetite decreases. If a dog is fed at regularly scheduled times, this decrease in appetite will be noticed immediately. Feeding the dog when the family eats not only makes it seem more like a member of the family, but decreases or ends begging at the table.

Dogs also usually need to defecate about 30 minutes after eating. The convenience of a regular eating schedule is obvious. It can be very difficult to house train a dog that eats all day long.

Snacks and treats

Snacks and treats are just doggy junk food. They should not be considered a dietary supplement. They are much more like fattening desserts such as cakes

and cookies. This is not to say that they should never be given, but be sparing and prudent with them. Many dogs become obese by eating treats. Aside from the obvious problem of obesity, if a dog eats many treats, it has less room (and less desire) to eat its proper diet, which can lead to health problems.

Changing diets

Again, it is best to maintain the dog on the same type and brand of dog food. This leads to more consistent eating and defecating habits and makes it much easier to regulate the dog's weight.

Sometimes it may be desirable or necessary to change the dog's diet, for example when making a switch from puppy food to adult food or when a particular food becomes unavailable. It is very important that the change to a new food be done gradually. Any abrupt change in food will lead to diarrhea and vomiting.

The change to the new food should take one to two weeks. Begin by adding a small amount of the new food to the original food. Gradually add more and more until you are feeding the new food exclusively. If this sounds similar to weaning, it should. You are literally weaning the dog off the old food and onto the new food.

Pregnancy and lactation

The average pregnancy in the dog lasts about 61 days. If the dog is in good body condition, she does not need additional food for the first three weeks. During the second three weeks she requires about 15 percent more food. By the final three weeks she may require 1-1/2 times as much food as she did before pregnancy. When she is nursing her pups, her food requirement goes up dramatically. She has to feed all of those growing puppies. When nursing a large litter, her food requirements can be five times or more what they were previously. This is another good reason to start weaning puppies at 3 weeks old.

If you follow the guidelines in this publication, you have an excellent chance to maintain a healthy, well-nourished dog. But remember, these are only guidelines. For additional information not covered here, please contact your veterinarian. Good luck to you and your dog.



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