Weight Loss Programs

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Like humans, overweight dogs are at risk for health problems and do not generally live as long as dogs that are trim. In addition to being at a greater risk for heart disease, overweight dogs show greater incidence of arthritis, circulatory problems, pancreatic disorders, liver disease, and more.

To determine if your dog is overweight, run your hand along his side. If you can not feel his ribs, it is time to start a weight reduction program. If your dog does not have a waist, that is another indication it is time to start a weight reduction program.

A weight reduction program for dogs is multi-faceted and should include the following:

Veterinary examination

Certain medical conditions can cause obesity in dogs, and any dog with a weight problem should be examined by a veterinarian prior to initiating a weight control program. The veterinarian will determine if there is an underlying cause for the obesity or if there are other medical conditions present, which could complicate weight reduction. The veterinarian is also a valuable resource in helping you establish a weight reduction program specific for you and your dog. Certified veterinary nutritionists are also a good resource.

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When starting a weight reduction program, your veterinarian can help you determine a realistic weight goal and timeline. It is important to understand how long the process may take. In general, a good goal to aim for is 1-2% of the body weight per week. We do not want the dog to lose weight too fast, since rapid weight loss increases the likelihood the weight will come back after the weight reduction diet is stopped.

Household participation

One of the main reasons weight reduction programs for dogs fail is that one (or more) member(s) of the household, or even the neighborhood, is not following the recommendations. Everyone must agree that the program is essential for the life and health of the dog. Each must follow the recommendations regarding diet, treats, exercise, etc., if the program is to be successful.

Diet change

Most weight loss protocols for dogs recommend estimating the dog's ideal weight, calculating the energy needs (maintenance energy requirements-MER) for a dog of that weight, and then feeding 25 to 50% of that amount of energy (calories). The calculated MER is based on the amount of energy used by an average, moderately active dog in a room temperature environment. There is extreme variability (up to 20%) in the actual MER of dogs weighing the same amount, since their activity level can vary greatly. For this reason, the dog's response to the program is monitored and adjustments made as necessary.

There are two basic ways to cut down on calories. One is to feed less of the food the dog is currently eating. The second is to switch to special weight reduction diets. And of course, with either way, table scraps are a no-no and treats need to be minimized.

Limit access to current food: If your dog will be placed on a weight reduction program that calls for her to continue eating her current food, it is generally recommended that the amount of food fed daily be cut back by 20 to 40%. For example, if your dog is normally fed 3 cups of dry food, she should now be fed in the range of a little less than 2 cups to 2-1/2 cups. After 3-4 weeks, the progress is evaluated. It may be necessary to cut the amount fed even further.

Feed a weight reduction diet: Weight reduction diets allow you to feed the usual amount of food (unless you are severely overfeeding), but still feed less fat and calories. For example, if your dog is normally fed 3 cups of dry food, the recommended amount of diet food will probably be about 3 cups also.

Feeding your dog more often during this time will keep hunger under control. Generally, feeding 2-4 small meals throughout the day is recommended. Also feed your overweight dog separately from the other pets to prevent him from eating their food. Feeding your dog before you prepare a meal or eat may also be helpful.

Eliminate table scraps and reduce treats

Table scraps are often high in fats and sugars, and thus in calories. Feeding your dog before you cook or eat may help decrease his begging. If you cannot resist giving treats, choose a treat that is made for dogs and is low in fat. Examples include:

- Air-popped popcorn, non-salted and non-buttered
- Broccoli
- Cooked green beans

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- Carrots
- Baked or frozen canned diet food (Cut small slices of canned food and bake them at 350ºF until crisp. Store in refrigerator. Alternatively, simply freeze slices of the canned food and feed it frozen to your dog.)
- Commercial low calorie dog treats

Treats should never make up more than 10% of the daily intake. New toys are often a good substitute for treats, as is exercise. For dogs who like to be groomed, a good brushing can take the place of food treats. If you ask your dog, she will probably say your attention is the best treat she could have.

Exercise

In addition to reducing calorie intake, it is important to increase the calories used. Exercise, may in fact, be more important than feeding a diet food.

Exercise programs will need to be tailored to the dog taking into account the condition of the dog's muscles and joints, heart, and respiratory system. It is important to choose activities appropriate for your dog and do not overdo. Start slow and work up to higher activity levels. Rest if you notice signs of fatigue, like heavy panting. In general, leash walking for 20-60 minutes a day, five days a week would be a great way to start. Swimming is also an excellent activity for obese dogs, since it places less stress on joints.

Exercise is a great way to give your dog attention and can be a substitute for treats. Exercise will help your dog build muscle, and increase mental stimulation, taking his focus away from food.

Assure adequate intake of vitamins, minerals, and fatty acids

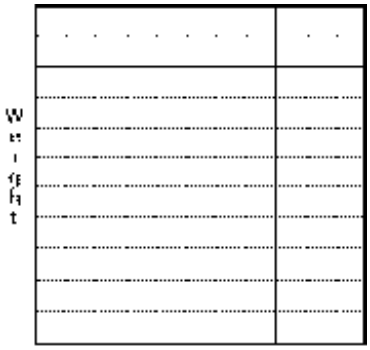
If you are feeding less of your dog's regular food, it also means your dog is receiving fewer nutrients. The added exercise may also produce a greater demand for nutrients. A vitamin/mineral supplement may be helpful to guarantee your dog's body has what it needs to stay healthy, alert, and active. Until recently, many of the weight reduction dog foods were deficient in fatty acids, and supplementation was necessary. One of the consequences of decreased fatty acid intake is a dry, flaky hair coat. To keep your pet's skin and coat healthy, it may still be necessary to supplement your pet with a fatty acid supplement such as Dermcaps or Drs. Foster and Smith's Vitacaps. Many high high quality weight reduction dog foods contain fatty acids, to alleviate this problem. They would also be formulated to contain the adequate amounts of vitamins and minerals.

Dietary aids

Various medications and nutraceuticals are being evaluated for use as an adjunct to the more traditional weight reduction program. These include dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), which has been shown to have antiobesity activity in rodents. A recent study at the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine demonstrated that dogs receiving DHEA while being on a weight reduction program lost weight faster and had lower cholesterol levels than those dogs who were on a weight reduction program alone.

Carnitine is being included in some weight reduction programs because of its effect on the utilization of fat by the body. Studies have suggested that another compound, pyruvate, has favorably altered the metabolism of obese rats and humans and was associated with increased weight loss. Chromium picolinate has been demonstrated to promote the activity of insulin. Its effect on weight loss in obese animals is being studied. The herbal compound *Garcinia cambogia* contains hydroxycitric acid (HCA), which is being investigated as a potential antiobesity agent. Coenzyme Q_{10}, also known as ubiquinone, is essential for energy production at the cellular level. It has been shown to benefit humans with various heart and muscle diseases. Again, studies of its effect on obese animals are currently underway. It has been shown to be safe, with no adverse effects demonstrated in animal studies according to Nutramax, a company which produces Coenzyme Q_{10} in an oral form for dogs, cats, and horses. Chitin/chitosan, a compound that may inhibit fat absorption and storage is undergoing evaluation as an adjunct to dietary alterations.

Monitor progress



Keep a written log of food intake (including all treats), exercise, and weekly weight. Weigh your dog weekly on the same scale at the same time of day. (Most veterinary offices will be more than happy to have you come in and use their scale.) It is sometimes helpful to plot out this information (dates and weights) on a graph. Remember, you may hit 'plateaus' in which your dog seems stuck at a certain weight. This is common. Do not despair, but continue with the weight reduction program.

A good way to help you enjoy your success is to take a 'before' diet picture, several during the weight reduction process, and then one at its conclusion. You will be amazed at the difference.

Make appointments with your veterinarian every 2-4 weeks to make adjustments in the weight control program.

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Maintenance

Week

Once the weight is lost, the last thing we want is for the dog to regain it. To be sure that does not happen, continue weighing your dog as you gradually increase food intake. You can either feed more of the weight reduction diet or change to a diet that is less restrictive. Do not start feeding free choice (the bowl of food is always there). If weight is regained consistently for 2 weeks, or more than 3% of weight is regained in one week, go back on the diet program. Remember, exercise needs to continue after the weight is lost or pounds will start to accumulate again.

Enjoy the results

When the weight goal is reached, congratulate yourself and your dog. You will be amazed at how much younger and livelier your dog seems to be. Enjoy the longer life you will be able to have with your happier, healthier friend!

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