

# Weight Loss Programs

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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



## 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!