

Battling Obesity: Help Your Overweight Dog



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We all love our dogs and often indulge them in extra treats, snacks and even food from the dinner table. Unfortunately, as with people, we have to be careful what we give our pups and make sure they maintain a healthy lifestyle and weight. An overweight dog can suffer from many health issues, from breathing problems, heart problems, and even diabetes. The added weight that the dog has to carry around can also add stress to the joints and bones, making movement difficult and painful.

So what do you do? You don't want to deny your dog the love, attention and rewards for being your loyal, dedicated companion. And you don't have to, just reward with healthy rewards.

Is my dog overweight or obese?

How can you tell if your dog is overweight or even obese? There is a quick way to identify if you're dog is in need of a lifestyle change.

Can you find your dog's ribs easily, or do you need to search to find them? If you can not locate them quickly, you have an overweight dog. If you realize your dog is overweight, don't be offended, it happens to the best of us, with well meaning intentions. But use this information as a way to help your dog and make him or her comfortable, healthy, and bring the spunk back to your pup.

Obesity, even in an otherwise healthy dog, is often responsible for congestive heart failure, stroke, heart attacks, cancer, lung disease, diabetes, constipation, intestinal gas, anal gland problems and an impaired immune system. Obese dogs are much more likely to die during surgery, have hypertension, to develop skin problems, arthritis and spinal disk problems. Because of the high risk of developing disease, these dogs have a much shorter life span in general. All of this because we can't resist giving Fido, the Bottomless Pit, a scrap of steak fat or a lick of ice cream in the name of love - or guilt.



Dogs are considered overweight if they are carrying 10% more than their ideal weight. They are considered obese if they are carrying 20% extra weight. Even though you still may be reluctant to call your beloved dog "obese" and think that he is happy like that, let's take a moment to investigate his quality of life. Sure, he lets you know he's grateful for the special treats he receives from the table, but can you answer "yes" to any of the following questions?

- Does he "waddle" like a duck instead of "stride" like a racehorse?
- Is he lethargic?
- Does he tire easily during exercise or play?
- Does he get out of breath easily?
- Does he have cushions of fat on his back or tail, or over the neck and shoulders?

A Quick Obesity Checkup:

1. Purebred dogs have breed standards that list ideal height and weight. Does your dog fit within this criteria? (for information, check out AKC.org for your dog's breed standard and recommended weight range).
2. If your dog is a mixed breed, find the standard for a purebred dog that is comparable to your dog in body type and height. Measure your dog's height from the withers to the ground while he is standing squarely with his front feet under the shoulders. Compare his height to the similar purebred dog.

- To weigh your dog, pick him up in your arms and stand on your bathroom scale. Weigh yourself without him and subtract the difference. If he is too big to hold or to stand on your bathroom scale, weigh him on the scale at the vet's office (you'll find most vets are very accommodating). Compare his weight to the breed standard or to the standard for the breed that comes closest to his type.
- Stand above your dog. You should see a narrowing at his pelvis, his "waist." Viewed from the side, his abdomen should curve and tuck up where it joins his rear legs. If your dog is longhaired, use your hands to judge.
- You should be able to easily feel his ribs. You should not, however, be able to see his ribs! Although in some cases, obesity can be caused by an under-active thyroid, by far the main causes for obesity are overeating and under activity.



What Should I do? - Next Steps for a Healthy Dog

Always take your dog to the vet for a checkup before beginning any radical diet changes. As mentioned above, in a small percentage of cases, obesity is caused by thyroid problems or other causes, so you need to first rule out these possibilities.

If your veterinarian has agreed with you on the necessity of a new diet and exercise plan, the first creature that will need to be re-trained is YOU! You will need to become hard-hearted and cruel. Well, not really, but it may seem that way when your poor "starving" dog is begging you for mercy, accusing you with pleading eyes! You must become firm, committed, a rock that will not budge. Just remember that if your dog's weight is more normal, his health and his overall quality of life will be much improved. And you'll enjoy his companionship for a much longer time.

Remember when he would dash effortlessly across the yard for that tennis ball, leap into the air for a Frisbee or cavort for hours in the water without huffing and puffing? Keep those images in your mind while he is trying to make you feel guilty (as he inevitably will) for not sharing your meals and for not feeding him all he wants. Dogs can be as manipulative as they are adorable and charming, as you are probably well aware! But who is the "master" here anyway?

Changing Your Dog's Diet:

Diet is a key part of any healthy lifestyle, including for dogs. Dogs also have different health needs than you do, so if

you're vet recommends a new diet, listen, and follow the diet. In addition, the basic pointers below will help to stick to the plan you and your vet developed.

- Never free feed a Fat Dog, i.e. don't leave down dog food for him to nibble on all day. Instead, divide the daily rations into two or more feedings.
- Do not leave food down for more than fifteen minutes at each meal.
- Listings on dog food cans and bags of dry food of "how much to feed the average adult dog" should be taken as basic guidelines that can vary widely according to the activity level and metabolism of a dog. Try cutting down the quantity you are currently feeding by 30-40%.
- Keep Fido out of the room while you are eating or preparing food. Close the door or confine him to his dog crate so YOU don't feel the urge to give in to those moist, pleading big browns.
- Eliminate table treats and scraps. You can occasionally give tidbits of broiled or boiled lean chicken or beef mixed with his regular food, or at any rate, away from the table. The catch is that these treats still must not constitute more than an infinitesimal percentage of your dog's regular food and must be INSTEAD OF not IN ADDITION TO the regular food.
- Make sure everyone in the family understands the need for your dog's new diet. All your efforts will be of no avail if someone keeps slipping Fido snacks. Watch that he doesn't steal food from a child's hand.
- Put childproof latches on cupboards with food, or move the food to inaccessible locations.
- Feed your Fat Dog away from your other pets, preferably in a room (like the bathroom or laundry room) by himself. Do not let him out until the other pets have finished and you have taken up their bowls and rinsed them (your dog can make a second meal from the crumbs left over by other pets).
- Be sure to remove all dinner plates, pots and pans and rinse them if they are in a nose's reach from Fido.
- If you are wondering where the extra calories come from, keep track of all extra tidbits during one day. Especially on small, sedentary dogs, even a few bites added to a "normal" ration can put on the pounds. One pound added to a 10-pound dog is already 10% body weight!
- Add raw vegetables to increase bulk and variety to food with few calories. Vegetables: carrots, pumpkin, peas, green beans, asparagus, broccoli or cauliflower are some suggestions. Avoid onions.
- Reduced calorie food will help a slightly overweight dog to cut down, but if your dog is really overweight, going this route alone will not help. Special diet foods are available through your vet.
- If you are changing food and he is resisting it, mix the new food 1/4 new to 3/4 of the old for a few days and gradually increase the amount of the new food.
- If he refuses to eat, it still does not hurt a healthy dog to fast for one or more days. So if he stages a hunger strike against the new food (especially if it is already mixed with the old), put down a tablespoon or two of the new mixture. Leave it down for 15 to 20 minutes twice a day and then take it up. Generally after a day or two of this (close your ears against the howls of protest and the looks of "you're killing me" and "I'm wasting away!"),
- he will give in and dive into the new food.
- Cut down quantities gradually over a two-week period.
- For those who can't resist giving something as a treat, a couple of small slices of carrot, a small rice cake or a few ice cubes will satisfy your guilt and his urge. For dogs with a sweet tooth, try a small chunk of apple, melon, pear, or a grape or two, (You will find other suggestions of healthy "bribes" in Nutrition/Special Treats/What's Good.)
- If you are so inclined, an alternative natural raw food diet provides a healthy way to reduce your dog's weight and keep it off.



**Be sure to always have plenty of fresh water available.
Diet must be combined with an exercise program to be truly effective.
Stick to the diet faithfully and you will see as a result a sleeker, shiny, playful, happy companion.**

Exercise - The Rest of the Story

The other part of a healthy lifestyle for your dog is exercise. You and your dog can take

longer walks, play more and generally be more active fairly easily. Dogs love to play, and love to play with you. Gradually increase the activity level, working with your vet to add new activities based on your dogs current health needs and abilities. Don't over do it, of course, and ease into the exercise routine following the advice of your vet, but stick with it. The fun part ab

out exercising with your dog is that you do it together, and you both benefit, not just from better health, but from a happy companionship and bond.

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