

Canine Weight Management

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Just as the average waistline of people in the United States has crept steadily upward, pets are more and more likely to be overweight. Estimates vary, but generally indicate that 30 to 40% of dogs are overweight or obese. Just as in humans, excess weight in dogs significantly increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, joint disease, and respiratory problems. The life expectancy of obese dogs is lower than that of dogs at a healthier weight. A recent Purina study showed that Golden Retrievers that were allowed to become obese suffered more health problems, and died almost two years earlier, than dogs from the same litter that were maintained at a healthy weight.

Excess weight accumulates when caloric intake exceeds energy expended. For dogs, this situation is usually the result of being overfed at meals, having too many treats, and not getting enough exercise. If you cannot feel your dog's ribs, and if you cannot see its waist from above, then your dog is probably overweight. Sometimes an overweight dog is suffering from thyroid problems, and needs a prescription thyroid supplement to normalize its metabolism. It is important to get a veterinary evaluation to determine the extent and cause(s) of the problem, and to work out a sound weight loss plan with your veterinarian.

The most serious health risk of canine obesity is pancreatitis, or inflammation of the pancreas. A dog can have an isolated attack of pancreatitis, or a chronic case that affects it in an ongoing way. Symptoms include vomiting, weakness, abdominal pain, diarrhea, and weight loss. The exact cause is often unknown, but pancreatitis is usually

associated with obesity and/or a diet of fatty foods. Feeding a dog fatty meat scraps is a common trigger for the disease. Sudden changes in diet, especially when a lower-fat diet is suddenly enhanced by rich treats, are often implicated in the onset of pancreatitis.

Certain medications also raise the risk, as well as trauma to the abdominal area.

However, diet is by far the leading cause of the disease. Treatment depends on the severity of the case, but prevention is the best strategy.

If your dog is overweight or obese, work with your veterinarian to create a plan for gradual, healthy weight loss. This may include a prescription weight loss food, such as Purina O/M. Once a dog is on such a food it may well be best to keep the dog on it for life. This will prevent a “yo-yo” dieting effect in which the dog loses and gains weight repeatedly. It will also minimize the risk for pancreatitis.

Acknowledging the problem is an important first step towards better health for an overweight dog, but just as in our own lives, sustaining a change in habits is more challenging. Some tips for managing the weight of your canine friend:

- Don't use treats as rewards for good behavior. Pet or play with your dog instead.
- If more than one family member feeds the dog, make sure everyone agrees on new feeding guidelines.
- If you have more than one dog, feed them separately.
- Never feed table scraps.
- Walk your dog instead of simply letting it out into the yard.
- Play fetch or Frisbee with your dog.
- Remember that allowing a dog to overeat is not really kind, and in fact will probably take years off your dog's life.