

Weight Reduction in Dogs – General Information

Weight loss is tough for anyone: two- or four-legged! However, losing weight and getting in shape can add not only years to you or your pet's life; it can also make those extra years more enjoyable. Shedding a few pounds off of your cuddly canine may be easier than you think. It simply requires understanding the need for weight loss and fitness, attention to details and simple assistance from your veterinary healthcare team.

Why a Healthy Weight is Important for your Dog

As few as five pounds above your dog's ideal weight can put it at risk for developing some serious medical conditions. Unfortunately, when a dog is overweight or obese it no longer is a question of "if" your dog will develop a condition secondary to the excess weight but "how many and how soon!" Some of the common disorders associated with excess weight include:

- Type 2 diabetes
- Respiratory and Heart disease
- Osteoarthritis
- High blood pressure
- Many forms of cancer – especially intra-abdominal cancers

Further, overweight and obese dogs are expected to live shorter lives than their fitter, normal weight counterparts. Heavy dogs tend to physically interact less with their families and are less energetic and playful. Because they tend to lay around more, it is easy to overlook illnesses since we attribute their lethargy to their "normal laziness." We are just now learning how serious and threatening a few extra pounds can be for both humans and our critter companions.

Start with Calories

For weight loss, the formulas seem simple enough: fewer calories in plus more calories out equals weight loss. Unfortunately, it's not as simple as that formula makes it appear. For starters, you should never put your dog on a diet without the assistance of your veterinary healthcare team. This is due to the fact that there may be a medical condition that is causing your dog's excess weight. Some common diseases associated with weight gain include hypothyroidism and hyperadrenocorticism or Cushing's disease. These diseases, along with others, should be eliminated as possible causes or contributors to your dog's weight issue prior to beginning a diet. Too many dogs start on a diet and fail to lose weight simply because the diet wasn't the problem – a disease was.

Let's start by calculating the calories your dog needs. You'll first need to have your dog examined by your veterinarian and an ideal weight calculated. Based on your pet's degree of excess weight, you may choose a target weight higher than the ideal weight to start. My general guidelines for safe weight loss in dogs are 3-5% body weight loss per month. A basic formula for weight loss in dogs is:

- Ideal weight in pounds divided by 2.2 give you weight in kilograms (kg)
- Calculate the Resting Energy Requirements (RER) based on this ideal weight
 - $70 \times [(\text{ideal weight in kg})]^{3/4}$ or $70 \times [(\text{ideal weight in kg}) \text{ to the } 3/4 \text{ power}]$
 - or
 - $\text{RER in kcal/day} = 30(\text{body weight in kilograms}) + 70$
- For weight loss in dogs, feeding the RER calories should be adequate. In cases that fail to respond to this amount of calories, the total will need to be reduced.

Ideal weight (lbs)	Calories to feed (kcal) at 100% RER per day
10	210
15	270
20	340
25	410
30	480
35	550
40	615
45	680
50	750

Ideal weight (lbs)	Calories to feed (kcal) at 100% RER per day
55	820
60	890
65	950
70	1020
75	1090
80	1160
85	1230
90	1300
100	1430

Note: This is a general guideline only and is not meant as a substitute from your veterinarian's specific recommendations.

For many dogs, the best way to feed will be by offering a food fed several times per day. It is vital that you count calories when entering into a weight reduction program. Feeding too much will result in no weight loss and feeding too little can potentially result in serious consequences such as hepatic lipidosis.

The Art of Changing Diet

When you are introducing a new diet to your dog, allow several days for the transition. In general, we recommend gradually adding the new diet over a one week period. Start by substituting one-quarter of the diet for one to two days, then increase to one-half total volume of food for another two days, then three-quarter new food for a final two to three days before completely switching to the new diet.

To enhance the palatability of the food, try warming the food, adding oregano or garlic and even adding an omega-3 fatty acid supplement or salmon juice over the food.

Exercise the Right Way

Based on observations of people walking with their dogs, the average pace is 20 to 25 minutes per mile. That is a slow troll with frequent pauses (on average every one to two minutes!) to allow their dog to smell an interesting object or mark territory. We're here to shed pounds, people! Walking for weight loss is very different than walking for pleasure. Make your objective to walk briskly and focused on the "out" leg of your walk and then you can smell the roses on the "back" leg. We recommend starting the activity with the brisk or "hard" effort first. Too often if we try to start slowly with the dog, allowing them to sniff and smell everything, we may have a challenging time getting them up to speed when we're ready. People often ask veterinarians, "Shouldn't we do a warm up before you walk them?" The simply reply, "Have you ever seen a fox take a few warm-up laps before an all-out sprint to capture its prey?" Our dogs are built to go from 0-100 miles per hour with very little risk of injury. And besides, we're going nowhere near an all-out sprint when we're walking for fitness. If our dogs' forefathers could see them now, what would they think?

Draw your leash close – generally within two to four feet of your body – pull them close to your left or away-from-the street side and set off at a pace you feel comfortable sustaining. This should be about a 12-15 minute per mile pace. It should feel like a brisk walk and you should break into a light sweat. The key is to keep it up! Don't stop. Don't look down at your dog when they inevitably want to stop and smell something or mark a hydrant. Continue staring straight ahead, tighten the leash (don't jerk) and give a command such as "No stop." "Come." or "Here." It is important that your dog understands that you have places to go and that this is different than your usual lolly-gagging affair. Head halters are a great method for training dogs to heel during a brisk walk and to retain their attention on the effort at hand. If they sit or refuse to walk, you may have to return home, crate them or put them in a quiet space without your attention and try again another time. We have yet to encounter a dog that didn't take readily to brisk walking.

Some additional simple tips for getting your dog to move more are:

- Move the food bowl upstairs or downstairs and rotate it so that the dog always has to walk to get to its food bowl. Fat dogs are smart dogs and if the food bowl moves upstairs, they'll start relocating upstairs, too.

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- Move the food bowl as far away from your dog's favorite haunts as possible. Again, many fat dogs will sleep and lay near the food bowl so they don't have to go far when the eatin' urge hits!
 - Use toys, balls, laser pointers, squeaky toys, anything that your dog finds interesting to chase. Try to engage your dog for at least ten to fifteen minutes twice a day. There are numerous toys that move and squeak that may also be interesting to your dog. Experiment and understand that what is exciting today may be boring tomorrow.

Rechecks and Weigh-Ins

After you've put your dog on a weight loss program, it's critical that you determine if it's working for your dog. Each dog is an individual and may require many changes in diet or routine before finding the correct approach. In general, your dog should be weighed every month until the ideal weight is achieved. If there is no significant weight loss in one month, typically about one pound, then a new approach should be pursued. There is nothing more frustrating than persisting in a behavior pattern that is not achieving the results we desire when a slight change could deliver significant improvements. Work closely and actively with your veterinary healthcare team to reach your goals faster and more safely.

Reluctant Patients

What about the dog that wakes you at four in the morning to be fed or the dog that stares at you during dinner or television time until you give in and feed them? Our dogs have trained us well and know exactly which buttons to press when it comes to getting their way. Here are some tips for handling the pleading pup:

- Do not use a self-feeder. While this seems obvious, auto-feeders are nothing more than unlimited candy machines to a fat dog. If you must, use an automated feeder that dispenses a set amount of food several times per day.
- Pet your dog or play with it when it begs for food. Many dogs substitute food for affection so flip the equation and you may find that playtime displaces chowtime.
- Walk your dog or take it outside when it begs. The distraction and interaction may be just enough to make it forget its desire for food.
- Feed small meals frequently – especially give a last feeding for those dogs that like to wake you up in the wee hours begging for more goodies – divide the total volume or calories into four to six smaller meals – whatever you do, don't feed extra food
- When the bowl is empty and your dog is pleading, add a few kibbles to the bowl. By a few, try ten or fifteen – not a handful.
- Give vegetables such as baby carrots, broccoli, celery and asparagus. Dogs love crunchy treats so make it a healthy – and low-calorie – choice.
- Offer fresh water instead of food. Many dogs love fresh water so when they are eyeing the empty food bowl, fill up the water bowl instead.

Multi-dog Households

What do you do if one dog is normal weight and the other is fat? While there are countless creative solutions to this problem, here are a few we've found successful"

- Feed separately – this is the ideal solution for multi-dog households. Feed the heavier dog its diet in one room while feeding the other dog its food elsewhere. After a prescribed time, generally fifteen to thirty minutes, pick the food up until the next feeding.
- Do not leave food out while you're away. In this scenario you can't be sure who ate what and the smart money is on the fat dog.

Most dogs will achieve their ideal weight within six to eight months. If the process is taking longer than this, something needs to be changed. A healthy weight loss would be close to one to five pounds per month based on your dog's size and current condition (weight loss of 3 to 5+% of body weight based on age and current physical condition). Some dogs may need to go slower while others may shed the pounds more quickly. Remember that the reason for your hard effort is to help your dog live a longer, healthier life. For most dogs, the secret to weight loss is a dedicated, committed and concerned family member. Our dogs don't understand that their excess weight is killing them. It's up to us as good stewards to protect them from harm and not inadvertently contribute to their premature death or development of debilitating diseases. Together – veterinary healthcare team, you and your dog – we can help your dog achieve its weight loss and fitness goals safely and successfully.

Today's Weight: _____ lbs.

Target or Ideal Weight: _____ lbs.

My dog's daily caloric requirements for weight loss: $[30(\text{weight in lbs} / 2.2) + 70] =$
_____ kcal per day

Amount of recommended diet to feed per day:

Next weight check: _____

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