

# Creating a Weight Reduction Plan for Dogs

Article by Krista Williams, BSc, DVM; Ernest Ward, DVM

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

## Why should my dog lose weight?

As few as five pounds above the ideal body weight can put your dog 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 soon and how serious. Some of the common disorders associated with excess weight include:

- Type 2 diabetes
- Heart disease
- Osteoarthritis (arthritis)
- Increased frequency of joint injuries
- High blood pressure
- Some forms of cancer - especially intra-abdominal cancers

Overweight and obese dogs usually have 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 lie around more, it is easier to overlook early signs of illness, since we may attribute their lethargy to their normal laziness. There is good evidence that dogs who are a healthy weight live significantly longer than dogs who are overweight.

## How should I begin a weight loss program for my dog?

Theoretically, weight loss seems simple enough: fewer calories in plus more calories out equals weight loss. Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that.

You should never put your dog on a diet without the assistance of your veterinary healthcare team. There may be an underlying medical condition that is causing or contributing to your dog's excess weight. Some common diseases associated with weight gain include hypothyroidism and hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's disease). These diseases, along with others, should be eliminated as possible causes or contributors to your dog's weight problem prior to beginning a diet. Too many dogs start on a diet and fail to lose weight simply because the diet was not the problem - a disease was. Your veterinarian will perform a physical examination and recommend blood tests to ensure that there are no obstacles to weight loss for your pet.

## How much should I feed my dog to promote weight loss?

In order to answer this question, your veterinarian will need to calculate your dog's ideal weight based on its breed and size. Based on your dog's degree of excess weight, your veterinarian may recommend a target weight higher than the ideal weight to start. After the dog loses this weight, a re-evaluation will be made to determine whether further weight loss is needed. A safe weight loss for most dogs is 3-5% body weight loss per month.

The following chart provides general calorie requirements based on weight ranges:

| Ideal weight (lbs) | Calories (kcal) needed at 100% RER per day | Ideal weight (lbs) | Calories (kcal) needed at 100% RER per day |
|--------------------|--|--------------------|--|
| 10                 | 210  | 55                 | 820  |
| 15                 | 270  | 60                 | 890  |
| 20                 | 340  | 65                 | 950  |
| 25                 | 410  | 70                 | 1020                                       |
| 30                 | 480  | 75                 | 1090                                       |
| 35                 | 550  | 80                 | 1160                                       |
| 40                 | 615  | 85                 | 1230                                       |
| 45                 | 680  | 90                 | 1300                                       |
| 50                 | 750  | 100                | 1430                                       |

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

For most dogs, feeding the RER calories should result in weight loss. In cases that fail to respond, the total number of calories will need to be reduced further.

For many dogs, the best way to feed will be by feeding a specific diet food in several meals per day. It is vital that you know how many calories are in the food that your dog is eating, and that you count the calories or measure the food 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 health consequences associated with malnutrition.

If you are using a calorie reduced diet obtained from your veterinarian, the calorie content of the food will be on the label, and a member of your veterinary healthcare team will help you determine the appropriate amount to feed. If you choose to use an alternate source of food, and this information is not available on the label, you will need to contact the manufacturer to get it.

## **What makes veterinary weight loss diets special?**

There are a number of weight control diets available at pet stores that work well for a dog who only needs to lose a small amount of weight. However, these diets are often not as effective as veterinary weight loss diets if a dog needs to lose a significant amount of weight or if your dog has other medical conditions.

Not all weight loss strategies work for every dog, so there are many different diets to address this. Some weight loss diets, such as Purina Proplan OM® and Royal Canin® Calorie Control, are high protein, low carbohydrate, others such as Royal Canin® Satiety and Hills® Prescription Diet w/d have high fiber content to help your dog feel more full and stop begging for food. Some newer weight loss diets, such as Hills® Prescription Diet Metabolic, use specific nutrients that can promote increased metabolism, helping dogs burn calories more quickly. Your veterinarian will be able to advise the best weight loss diet for your dog's particular situation.

## **How quickly should I introduce the new reducing diet to my dog?**

When you are introducing a new diet to your dog, you should allow about a week to make the transition. To minimize digestive upsets, mix the new diet in with the old diet in gradually

increasing proportions. Start by feeding  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the new diet mixed with  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the old diet for one to two days, then increase to half-and-half for another two days, then  $\frac{3}{4}$  new food and  $\frac{1}{4}$  old food for a final two to three days before completely switching to the new diet.

To enhance the palatability of the diet food, try warming the food, adding a flavoring such as a small amount of salmon juice, low-fat chicken or beef broth, or an omega-3 fatty acid supplement.

## **How can I get my dog to lose more weight through exercise?**

The first thing you can do to help your dog lose weight is to increase the intensity and length of your daily walk. Few dogs will naturally walk at a pace that generates the elevated heart rates needed for sustained aerobic activity and weight loss. Based on observations of people walking with their dogs, the average pace is 20 to 25 minutes per mile (12-15 minutes per kilometer), which is actually a stroll. They make frequent pauses (on average every one to two minutes) to allow their dog to smell an interesting object or mark territory. Walking for weight loss is very different than walking for pleasure. You should aim for a daily brisk 30-minute walk. With this sort of walking, you should break into a slight sweat within a few minutes.

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

- Move the food bowl upstairs or downstairs, changing its location frequently so that the dog always has to walk to get to its food bowl. Overweight dogs are smart dogs and if the food bowl moves upstairs, they will head upstairs, too.
- Feed your dog in a treat ball or puzzle feeder to slow down ingestion and help them feel more full.
- Use toys, balls, laser pointers, squeaky toys, or sticks to encourage games of chase or fetch. Try to play with your dog for at least ten to fifteen minutes twice a day. There are toys that move randomly and make noises that may also be interesting to your dog. For many dogs, variety is important, and what is exciting or interesting today may be boring tomorrow.

## **How often should I have my dog's progress checked?**

After you have put your dog on a weight loss program, it is critical that you determine if it is working for your dog. In general, your dog should be weighed at least every month until the ideal weight is achieved. Each dog is an individual and may require adjustments in the recommended diet or routine before finding the correct approach. If there is no significant

weight loss in one month, (3-5% of the starting body weight), then the program will need to be modified. Sometimes, making only a slight change can deliver significant improvements.

## **My dog is hungry, and he pesters me until I feed him. Any suggestions?**

It is often easier to give in to 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 relent. These 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 your 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 do use an automatic feeder, use one that opens with a timer. This way you can measure out the proper amount and divide it into daily meals.
- Pet your dog or play with him when he begs for food. Many dogs substitute food for affection so flip the equation and you may find that playtime displaces mealtime.
- Go for a walk with your dog when he begs. The distraction and interaction may be just enough to make him forget his 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, do not feed extra food.
- When the bowl is empty and your dog is pleading, add a few kibbles to the bowl. A few means only a few - not a handful. Keep a few kibbles separate from your dog's measured daily ration for this purpose.
- If more than one person is feeding your dog, you should measure out the total daily food into a separate container such as a covered food storage container. Then, everybody knows how much the dog has been fed, and how much is left for the day. If you enjoy giving treats to your dog, feed her several kibbles from the container rather than giving her high calorie dog biscuits.
- Give a couple of pieces of vegetables such as baby carrots, frozen sliced carrots, broccoli, green beans, celery, or asparagus. Most dogs love crunchy treats so make it a healthy and low-calorie choice. Do not give meat treats or carbohydrate treats such as bread or pasta. Even small amounts of these can lead to weight gain in dogs prone to obesity.
- Offer fresh water instead of food. If your dog is eyeing the empty food bowl, a drink of cold, fresh water may satisfy the craving.

**We have more than one dog in the house, and only one is overweight.**

### **What should I do?**

The ideal solution for multi-dog households is to feed the dogs separately. Feed the overweight dog his diet in one room while feeding the other dog its food elsewhere. After a prescribed time, generally fifteen to thirty minutes, remove any uneaten food.

Do not leave food out while you are away from home. You cannot control who eats what when you are not around.

### **How long will my dog need to be on a diet?**

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 is between one to five pounds per month based on your dog's size and current condition. Some dogs may need to go slower while others may shed the pounds more quickly.

For most dogs, the secret to weight loss is a dedicated, committed, and concerned family. Dogs do not understand that their excess weight is causing them harm. It is 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, you and your veterinary healthcare team can help your dog achieve a healthy body weight and condition safely and successfully.

Contributors: Krista Williams, BSc, DVM; Ernest Ward,  
DVM