

Getting back in shape

People are getting fatter – but it is also affecting our pet's health. We love our pets and like to give them the little indulgences that we enjoy, so pets are gaining weight too. And we like our pets to be “well-rounded” – most pet dogs have considerably more body fat than dogs in the wild, but wild and feral dogs are often closer to the way a fit dog should look.

Being overweight can have lasting consequences. They can even be fatal. Studies have shown that overweight dogs do not live as long. They are also prone to illnesses that spoil their quality of life, such as arthritis, breathing difficulties, heart problems and diabetes. There is a genuine risk of killing your pet with kindness.

The way the body works changes considerably in overweight animals. Once an animal is overweight, the working speed of the body slows and they are less active so they do not need to eat much to maintain their weight. It is rare for medical problems to cause obesity in dogs.

He always seems hungry

Fortunately, dogs can't buy chips on the way home from work, nor do they have to recover from “bad hair days” with chocolate bars at tea break!

Responsible owners should learn to resist soulful eyes. Dogs are scavengers in the wild and it is natural for dogs to eat everything they find – but it is our fault if we give them too many treats. Begging for food is a trick that we teach dogs – it does not mean that they are hungry.

Giving occasional treats when you are eating creates a begging habit. The scientific name for this is “variable reinforcement” and it is why people play fruit machines – the occasional win makes up for all the losses.

The guidelines below will give you an indication of how to find out if your pet is the correct weight.

Start young

There is evidence that chubby puppies become fat adults. Breeds likely to get joint problems such as poor hips (hip dysplasia) are more likely to develop these problems with overfeeding.

Feed your puppy the minimum amount for the body weight recommended on the packet, and monitor body shape as your dog grows. Ask the vet to check at vaccination time or make an appointment to see one of our qualified nurses who will be able to advise on all nutritional and feeding matters.

Is my dog overweight?

You cannot tell by weighing a dog and looking at tables of ‘right weight for breed’ because all individuals are different. The only way is to look at body shape and assess body fat. Does your pet have a potbelly? Viewed from above, does your dog have a waist? That is, does the body taper after the rib cage? Can you easily feel your dog's ribs?

No waist, a bit of a paunch, and a well-cushioned ribcage means it is time to take action.

The average “chubby” pet is usually at least 15% overweight.

The next step

It is best to start with a trip to the vet. You are likely to begin increasing your dog's exercise so he will need a check-up for medical problems that might interfere.

You can buy good quality, calorie-controlled foods from the Practice, which are usually the most effective way of losing weight, and well worth considering. Our nurses run weight control clinics for regular monitoring of body shape and weight. These clinics are free of charge and are essential to ensure that the diet is working, and weight is not being shed too fast.

Food diary

Make a record of everything – including table scraps and treats – that your dog eats for a few days. This is often valuable in highlighting “extras” that your pet is getting. A dog that does not seem to eat much dog food probably still has an appetite for sausages and chocolate biscuits!

Weight watchers!

With calorie-controlled prescription diets, your weight watchers nurse will advise you how much to feed daily. This will be for the target weight, not the current weight, of your dog.

It is best to weigh food out daily, at least to start with. Many dry diets come with calibrated scoops but it is easy to overfill these. You can reduce hunger by feeding two or three times a day, so long as you don't go above the daily recommended amount. If you must feed treats, either take these out of the daily ration, or choose low calorie items, such as a piece of carrot, apple, or rice cake.

If you are not using one of the recommended 'calorie-control' foods, but just reducing the amount of normal food, the diet is less likely to be successful.

You can try buying a 'light' (or 'lite') diet and feeding three quarters of what is recommended on the packet for your dog's 'target' (i.e. the right, slim) weight. This is usually

about 15% less than the current weight but if you are unsure, check with your vet.

However, many of these diets are designed to avoid weight gain, but they are not 'reducing' diets to promote weight loss.

If your pet is not losing weight after two months, you should consider changing to a diet prescribed by your vet.

Remember, non-fattening treats such as going for a walk, playing a game or simply stroking and giving attention. They last longer than food, help to strengthen your relationship more – and are good for your health too!

You're welcome to call in at the surgery and weigh your pet as often as you like – we record all body weights on the pet's record and it is helpful to be able to look back and monitor weight loss (or gain!)

Going to the gym?

Dogs do not need club membership for exercise. On its own, exercise is not enough but it is helpful. Start gradually, and be especially careful with elderly pets, particularly in hot weather.

Older pets should see the vet first. With exercise, little and often is the safest way to start. Try to take your dog out at least twice a day, and start to introduce active games – ambling down the road on a lead is not going to burn off many calories. Increase the activity level at home as well. Buy toys in which you can hide food, such as buster cubes, but remember to deduct the “treat” from the daily food allowance.

How long will it take?

Dogs that look overweight are at least 15% overweight. So a dog of 40 kilos may be 6 kilos overweight, and a 12 kilo (26.5 lbs) dog may be 1.8 kilos over. A safe rate of weight loss is 1% weekly. In this example the larger dog should aim to lose 1.6 kilos over a month, and the smaller dog 0.48 kilos. Confused? Consult one of our nurses or book an appointment at the weight clinic!

When your dog reaches the target weight, take another look. Is your pet “in shape”, with a waist and a slender tummy? Can you feel the ribs easily?

If not, continue with the diet.

If the dog is now perfect, do not slip back into old habits, even though your pet may now be more active. You can increase feeding a little – say by ten per cent – and weigh your pet every fortnight to check that the weight is not creeping back. Diets are available that are reduced in calories, but not restricted enough to reduce weight, but which when correctly fed, will stop it creeping back on. Ask your vet or nurse for advice.

The diet isn't working

All dogs are different, so if yours is not losing weight on the diet, it may be that your dog burns calories slowly. The daily food intake is above your dogs energy needs and needs to be reduced further. Consult your vet for advice – but first, check that everybody in the house is sticking to the diet. It only takes one person who 'feels sorry' for the dog and is cheating to ruin the whole diet! Explain that they are putting the dog's health at risk and may be reducing life expectancy.

The high cost of snacking

- A slice of buttered toast to a cocker spaniel provides about a sixth of the daily calorie requirement – or two bags of crisps for a person
- A sausage to a Staffie is the equivalent of one and a half chocolate bars to a person
- A chocolate digestive to a Jack Russell is almost the same as a portion of chips to a person

Treats you can give

Giving treats, other than for training, is not essential – and for any dog, they do not have to be large! A "treat" should always be given in portions no bigger than the nail of your first finger!

Many dogs like crunchy, raw vegetables, such as a piece of carrot or cucumber, or even a piece of rice cake. If you are feeding a dry food, when you weigh out the daily "ration", set aside a few biscuits from this and give throughout the day.

If you would like any further detail on the information above please contact us on 01256 764 771 or use the contact page on our website.