

# Dog Health: Nutrition



Dogs are meat-eaters by nature. However, they metabolize carbohydrates efficiently and can synthesize some required nutrients from eating plant matter. Dog food should contain a combination of ten essential amino acids, which dogs can only get from what they eat. Carbohydrates, fats, fiber, minerals, and vitamins are other important components of a well-balanced canine diet.

Most companion dogs eat kibble or canned commercial dog food. The protein in those foods usually comes from fresh or dried meat, poultry or fish, or their by-products. Soybeans, corn, and wheat are other common protein sources. High-quality dog foods often combine proteins from plant and animal sources.

## **Age Matters**

Specially formulated puppy, adult, and senior diets meet dogs' nutritional needs during these life stages. Puppy or growth diets typically contain more protein, calories, and fat than adult food. Overfeeding a growth diet can cause a number of problems, including obesity and growth-related joint and bone problems, especially in giant breeds.

Feed puppies three or four times daily. By about six months, they can transition to an adult diet, fed twice a day. Adult or maintenance diets can be fed until dogs enter their senior years, which vary widely among breeds. Make dietary changes gradually to prevent digestive upset.

## **Nutritional Balance and Completeness**

Dogs have specific nutritional needs that include the appropriate combination of digestible protein, fat, carbohydrates, fiber, essential amino acids, vitamins, minerals, and water. Federal law requires pet food manufacturers to list their products' ingredients on the label. Dog foods should meet the standards set by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), which is a nonprofit organization of state and federal experts that develops guidelines for the production, labeling and sale of food for animals. Some AAFCO standards use six-month feeding trials to demonstrate that dogs can survive and thrive on a particular food.

## **Food Types and Cost**

Commercial dog food can be canned, semi-moist, or dry. Many dogs prefer canned food, with its higher moisture, sugar, and fat content. It also tends to be the priciest. Semi-moist food has the most fillers and preservatives to make it hold its shape and appear palatable. Kibble is the most convenient and also keeps teeth and gums in good shape. It can be left out during the day without spoiling, as long as the resident pooch isn't prone to over eating.

Cost often determines what guardians feed their dogs. Premium foods cost more, but because they contain nutritious and well-balanced ingredients, dogs typically require smaller quantities. Cheaper foods can be complete, balanced and meet a dog's basic nutritional needs. But they also are apt to contain more artificial colors, sugar, fillers, and other indigestible or undesirable ingredients.

## **When to Feed and How Much**

Most owners feed their dogs in the morning and evening. Dogs fed several small meals rather than a single large one have a reduced chance of stomach upset and may be less likely to develop a potentially fatal condition called gastric dilatation and volvulus or "bloat."

## Dog Health: Nutrition *(continued)*

Start by following the manufacture's recommendations, based on your dog's size and weight. If it starts to put on too much weight, cut back the amount of food. Likewise, if it acts ravenous and loses weight, adjust the amount upward.

### **Dog Obesity: An Overview**

At first, the signs of obesity can be subtle and gradual. This can be even more difficult to identify in longhaired breeds. Most veterinarians and guardians assess their dog's weight on a "look and feel" basis. At its ideal weight, you can feel a dog's ribs as individual solid structures without using very much pressure, and its chest, abdomen and hips will form a well-defined, waist-like "hourglass" shape when viewed from above.

Signs of obesity include:

- A "waddling" gait (rolling from side to side when moving)
- Lethargy
- Exercise intolerance
- Difficult or noisy breathing

These signs can be associated with conditions other than obesity so have an overweight dog examined by a veterinarian before putting it on a diet or exercise program.

Even a moderate amount of excess body fat can reduce a dog's lifespan and increase its chance of early death. Obesity increases the likelihood that a dog will develop infectious diseases, cancer, arthritis, skin disorders, high blood pressure, respiratory disease, reproductive irregularities, diabetes, and heart, neurological, and musculoskeletal diseases.