

Canine Obesity

- Obesity (the storage of excess fat) is usually caused by excessive food intake and insufficient exercise.
- According to estimates, 40% to 50% of dogs are overweight and 25% of dogs are obese.
- By examining your dog, your veterinarian can determine whether he or she is overweight or obese and help you create a weight-loss program.
- Dogs can develop many obesity-related health problems.
- The most effective weight-loss plans involve increasing activity and feeding fewer calories.

What You Need to Know

Obesity (the storage of excess fat) is usually caused by excessive food intake and insufficient exercise. According to estimates, 40% to 50% of dogs are overweight and 25% of dogs are obese. Obesity is more common in older, less active pets. Dogs that are fed homemade meals, table scraps, and snacks are more likely to be overweight than dogs that are fed only a commercial pet food.

There are many obesity-related health problems (see the box), and some medical conditions can lead to obesity, so it's important to bring your dog in for annual veterinary checkups. By examining your dog, your veterinarian can tell you whether he or she is overweight or obese, what the cause is, and how to treat him or her.

Losing weight can help your dog live longer, avoid disease, and feel better, especially on hot days.

What to Do

Consult your veterinarian before changing your dog's eating and exercise habits. Your veterinarian can recommend an appropriate diet and exercise program for safe weight loss.

When helping your dog lose weight, slower is safer. "Crash" diets or intense workouts aren't appropriate for inactive dogs. If your dog gained the weight slowly, he or she can lose it slowly.

The most effective weight-loss plans involve increasing activity and feeding fewer calories. The

more convenient you make it, the better the chance of sticking with it.

When on a weight-loss program, your dog should lose 2% or less of his or her initial body weight per week. For example, a 100-lb dog should lose no more than 2 lb every week. A weight-loss program may take 1 year or longer.

Diet

There are several dietary strategies for helping your dog lose weight. Your veterinarian may suggest one or more of the following (be sure to use a measuring cup to keep track of how much you're feeding your dog):

- **Feed your dog smaller meals more often.** This helps your dog burn more calories and keeps him or her from begging for food. However, don't feed more food per day. Instead, use a measuring cup to divide your dog's daily ration into three or more feedings.
- **Feed your dog less of his or her regular food per day.** This strategy is most effective with increased activity. First check with your veterinarian to ensure that your dog will receive the right amount of nutrients.

Obesity-Related Problems

- Heart disease
- Reduced life span
- Ruptured ligaments
- Labored or difficult breathing
- Fatigue
- Greater risk for heatstroke
- Diabetes
- Joint problems, including arthritis
- Immune system problems
- Pancreas problems

Common Conditions

- ***Instead of feeding your dog less, gradually switch him or her to a low-calorie food recommended by your veterinarian.*** The change should be slow because a sudden switch could upset your dog's stomach. Combine the new food with your dog's usual food in larger and larger proportions over several weeks until you are only providing the new food.
- ***Give treats only on special occasions, such as birthdays, holidays, or good visits to the veterinarian.*** Offer low-calorie treats (see the box) and eliminate or limit fattening ones.

Exercise

You can help your dog become more active and lose weight by scheduling regular playtimes and walks. Consult your veterinarian before beginning an exercise program for your dog. For walks, start out slow to give your dog a chance to adapt to an exercise routine. Work up to a brisk, 10- to 20-minute walk or jog once or twice a day. On hot or cold days, go easy or rest. If you don't have time to walk your dog, hire a dog walker. Doggy day care centers can also help ensure that your dog gets plenty of exercise throughout the day.

Here are some calorie-burning activities for your dog:

- Fetch
- Keep away
- Playing with other pets

- Walking or jogging
- Running off leash
- Swimming (great for arthritic dogs)
- Tricks for low-calorie treats
- Tug of war

Consider adopting another pet so that your dog has a playmate that encourages activity. If you don't want to commit to a new pet, try scheduling regular visits with the pet of a friend or relative.

Low-Calorie Dog Treats

- Apple slices
- Banana slices
- Carrot slices
- Green beans
- Lean meat (cooked)
- Melon chunks
- Packaged treats (low-calorie or formulated for a smaller dog)
- Pear slices
- Popcorn (without butter or oil)
- Pretzels
- Rice cakes

Do not feed your dog (or cat) grapes or raisins because they have reportedly caused kidney problems in pets.