



Feeding Dogs for Life Stages

When a dog reaches full maturity, he enters the maintenance period. Normal healthy dogs who are not pregnant, nursing or hardworking have relatively low nutritional requirements for maintaining an appropriate body condition. Good body condition for a dog is defined as:

- One in which the animal is well proportioned
- Easily observable waist behind the ribcage
- Ribs can be felt with a slight fat covering over them

Dogs fed a complete and balanced diet do not need supplemental vitamins, minerals, or meat. If supplemental meat or table scraps are fed, they should account for no more than 10% of the total diet. Higher levels can dilute the nutritional value of a dog's diet, predispose him to obesity and may create a finicky eater.

For dogs with lower caloric needs and/or for dogs that are less active, attention should be paid to the potential for excessive weight gain. Overweight dogs may have more health problems and a shorter life expectancy. Often a dog's weight can be reduced simply by eliminating table scraps and treats from the diet and by avoiding high-energy dog foods.

Feeding recommendations for adult dogs can vary, depending upon the breed, activity, metabolism and owner's preference. Whether or not a dog is fed once or twice each day, he should be fed at the same time, and fresh drinking water should always be made available.

Feeding During Pregnancy

Regardless of the breed of dog, the female should be at least one year of age and in at least the second heat period before she is bred. If males are overweight, they may be physiologically and anatomically inefficient for mating. Overweight females can have lower conception rates and more problems at whelping. If possible, each dog should be fed as an individual to achieve and maintain normal body condition.

During the last two to three weeks, requirements for all nutrients for pregnant females will increase, and caloric requirements can be met during this last trimester by gradually increasing the female's food intake. Diets containing more than 1600 metabolizable calories per pound of food and at least 21% protein are recommended. The easiest way to ensure proper nutrition is to feed a good-quality dog food that is labeled complete and balanced for reproduction and growth, or for all life stages.

Unless a female has a tendency to put on too much weight during pregnancy, she can be given all the food she wants to eat. It is not unusual for a pregnant female to temporarily decrease her intake at about three to four weeks into the pregnancy. Normally, she will eat more during the latter phase of pregnancy. However, if this does not occur and body condition begins to deteriorate, steps should be taken to increase food intake. This can be done by moistening dry food with warm water to improve palatability, or by adding small amounts of canned dog food to the dry food and feeding several times each day. As whelping nears, the female may lose her appetite. This is considered normal behavior, and unless she appears to be having a health problem, no change in the feeding program is necessary. In many cases, food refusal during the ninth week is an indication that whelping will occur within the next 24 to 48 hours. Usually within 24 hours after whelping, the female's appetite will return. After the puppies are born, she should receive all the food she wants.

During reproduction, water serves as a carrier of nutrients to the developing fetus and removes wastes for elimination. Fresh water in a clean bowl should be available at all times.

Feeding During Lactation

The demand for milk by nursing puppies will continue to increase for about 20 to 30 days (or up to 4 weeks). Consequently, the female's food and water requirements increase during this time. At peak lactation, the female's food intake may be two to four times above her usual or maintenance food intake. In order to maintain good body condition and to provide ample amounts of milk for the puppies, nursing females should be offered all the food they want.

Moistening dry dog food with water will help increase food intake during lactation. Another important reason for offering the dry food moistened is that at three to four weeks of age, normal puppies will start nibbling solid food. As puppies begin to eat more solid food, the demand on the female for milk production will decrease. Normally puppies are weaned between six and eight weeks of age, and by weaning time, the female's food consumption should be less than 50 percent above her usual or maintenance level.

To help reduce the milk flow and prevent mammary gland problems, the following procedure for weaning is recommended:

On the day the puppies are weaned, the female should not receive any food, but should have plenty of fresh water to drink. The puppies should be separated from the dam and offered food and water. Dry food moistened with warm water may help stimulate the puppies' food intake. On the day after weaning, the dam should receive 1/4 the amount of food she was fed prior to being bred. The dam and puppies can be grouped together for several hours on the day after weaning so that the pups can nurse the dam dry. On the third day, the female should receive 1/2 the amount fed prior to breeding, and on the fourth day, 3/4 the amount. By the fifth day she should be

offered her usual maintenance level of food. If the litter is large, the female may be quite thin when the puppies are weaned. In this case, she should be given extra food after the fifth day of weaning and until her body condition returns to normal.

Refusal To Eat

If your dog is normally not picky about its food and if you have avoided creating "problem eater" habits, a trip to your veterinarian may be in order. Any deviation from his normal habits may be a sign of illness.

Offering variety in pet foods encourages a dog to become a "holdout" to see what it will be offered next. Some dogs are eager to eat a particular pet food for several days. Suddenly this eagerness vanishes and they eat reluctantly or refuse to eat for a few days. This refusal can be the dog's own attempt to control calorie intake. Overeating can cause a dog, like a human, to experience an uncomfortable feeling. The dog will attempt to relieve his discomfort by not eating or eating very little of his food.

Transitioning To a New Food

If for health or other reasons you must change your dog's diet, do it gradually over a seven to ten day period. Add a small amount of the new diet to the food currently being fed. Each day increase the quantity of the new diet and decrease the amount of the old. This gradual diet change helps avoid digestive upsets.

Feeding Nursing Puppies

As a rule of thumb, each puppy in a litter should gain approximately its birth weight each week during the lactation or nursing period.

While most females are excellent mothers, some nervous or inattentive dams may require special attention to help them calm down and accept their new offspring. This may involve working with both the dam and/or puppies, and placing pups near nipples at feeding time. Poorly nursing puppies may be smaller in size, cooler in body temperature and weigh less. Routinely handling the pups will allow for an opportunity to check their condition and progress, although excessive handling may be stressful for the dam and pups and should be avoided.

Introducing Puppies to Solid Foods

By six weeks of age, most puppies are ready to be weaned. If they have started to eat solid foods from the dam's dish, it is not unusual for puppies to begin to wean themselves at about four to five weeks of age.

Young puppies should be fed an appropriate puppy life stage food at least three times a day until their food requirements, per pound of body weight, begin to level off as they mature. Feeding schedules can be reduced to twice a day when pups are four to five months old, and once a day when they are eight months or older. Fresh water in a clean bowl should be available at all times.

Warm water or milk can be used to moisten dry food, however, too much milk can act as a laxative and cause digestive problems for some puppies and adult dogs. One hour should be allowed for a puppy to eat, after which the uneaten portion should be discarded.

Establishing routine eating habits by feeding a puppy in the same place and at the same time each day is recommended and can help in housetraining. Offering human foods from the table is not recommended because it encourages begging and may create a finicky eater. Puppies consuming a complete and balanced diet do not need supplemental vitamins, minerals, or meat.

The amount of food offered to a puppy will vary depending upon its size, activity, metabolism, and environment. For the best results, develop a regular feeding schedule, such as three small meals a day for younger pups. You can gradually reduce to one feeding in the morning and one in the evening as your puppy ages. An overweight puppy not only presents a poor appearance, but the excess weight can cause bone abnormalities. Anytime owners have questions or concerns about their animal's body condition, they should consult their own veterinarian.

Feeding Older Dogs

Aging dogs are defined as older or geriatric when they have reached the last 25 percent of their expected life span:

- Small breed dogs greater than 12 years of age
- Medium breed dogs greater than 10 years of age
- Large breed dogs greater than 9 years of age
- Giant breed dogs greater than 7 years of age

Some signs of aging are described as:

- changes in body weight
- difficulty in locomotion (movement)
- changes in hearing and/or eyesight
- changes in skin and/or haircoat
- changes in urine or bowel habits
- bad breath associated with teeth or mouth problems

Current commercial diets formulated for adult dogs at maintenance generally provide adequate protein. Less active animals may have reduced energy requirements, and caution should be used when feeding energy dense diets to avoid the risk of excessive weight gain.

