
A-Way to Wag Paw Prints

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Is Your Dog Fit, or FAT?

No one wants to hear their dog is overweight or fat, but chances are, many people own an overweight dog. The human obesity epidemic is growing rapidly in the United States and in fact is following just as quickly with dogs and other small animals.

In the United States, 58 million people are overweight, 40 million people are obese and 3 million are morbidly obese. Eight out of ten people over the age of twenty-five are overweight. And 78% of Americans are not meeting the basic activity level recommendations. These are quite frightening statistics.

Now, consider how many people own dogs – it is estimated that there are approximately 75 million dogs owned in the United States – how many of those dogs are overweight? It is further estimated that at least forty percent of the dogs are overweight. In fact, there has been a recent release of an appetite control drug for dogs to assist with the growing epidemic of overweight dogs. Considering that many parts of the world will go to bed hungry tonight, the idea of a weight control drug for dogs seems fairly preposterous.

Now, if 78% of Americans are not meeting their basic activity levels, how many of those people that own dogs are actually exercising their dogs? Letting the dog out to the backyard to relieve itself does not count as exercise. And buying another dog to let them exercise each other is not always the answers! Many of you may be slinking in your chair as you are reading this or looking at your dog and wondering if they are overweight, there are many things that you can do to help.

Obesity in dogs is associated with serious medical issues and will shorten a dog's life span. Heavier dogs have a poor resistance to both viral and bacterial infections, have a slower healing process, and are more likely to suffer from cardiac, respiratory and metabolic issues. In addition, excessive weight can cause skin irritations due to the extra skin and weight and pose orthopedic problems. Many orthopedic problems, such as hip dysplasia and knee problems, such as cranial cruciate tears, are aggravated by excessive weight.

How does a dog get fat? It is not difficult – more food than they should receive, too many treats, and not enough exercise is a great start. Additional factors, such as age, breed, spaying and neutering also contribute to

weight gain. After the age of six or seven years in most dogs, the metabolism slows down and the dogs require less caloric intake. Spaying and neutering is important in many animals, but may alter some hormone levels and require the dog to receive more activity to abate the slower metabolism. In addition, some breeds are more prone to weight gain secondary to society norms. For example, we are accustomed to seeing most dogs at an overweight status. Labrador Retrievers, Basset Hounds and Pugs are examples of breeds we are accustomed to seeing with extra weight and then we assume this is the norm.

We live in such a fast-pace society and it is often difficult to sneak in a walk with our dogs. So to compensate, we often try to counterbalance by giving them a treat, table scraps or a big bone. Everyone has done it – we come home from a long day at work and we are too tired to walk the dog so we throw them some extra treats or some extra food in their bowl. We appease our guilt by feeding more.

We may also be unknowingly guilty of over feeding our dogs with miscalculation of a “cup”. For example do you actually have a cup measurement in the dog's dry food or is there a scoop or some other container? I have seen people use empty coffee cans for a scoop and count that as a cup. Something as simple as a measuring device may be the reason your dog is gaining weight.

When we shop for commercial dog foods, we look for something in the title of the food that describes our dog. For example: Senior, Puppy, Maintenance, Large Breed, Small Bites and the like, lure us to buy that particular food to best meet the needs of our dog. Pay less attention to the title of the food and more attention to the Guaranteed Analysis of the food.

Every food, dry or canned, must have one according to AAFCO Guidelines. Your average healthy adult dog with moderate activity should only require a dry food with a Crude Protein Level of 22% and a Crude Fat of 12%. A high activity level adult dog or a growing puppy really only need about 26% Crude Protein and 18% Crude Fat. These numbers fluctuate by a few percentage points based on breed and growth rate either way but not much.

The best thing to do is ask your vet for a ball park figure on what protein and fat levels you should look for when buying foods. Make sure you specify whether you are feeding dry or wet foods as the Crude Protein and Fat Levels for wet foods are not the same as dry foods. If you are adding wet to dry to “flavor it up” and are looking at the label on the can the same way you are looking at the label on the dry, you are mistaken. Ask your vet how to convert these numbers, so that you can have a better idea of your dog’s intake of protein and fats.

Children may covertly sabotage diet plans for your dog with extra treats, food thrown from the high chair, spilled chips and licks of ice cream. Try to educate the children in the house on the appropriate treats for your dog. For younger children, move the dogs to another room during meals.

Dogs are mobile creatures – they are not meant to be couch potatoes. Dogs should be given ample exercise on a regular basis. Daily walks, romps in the park and playtime in the backyard are all good options. Daily walks may consist of anywhere from ten minutes to an hour, once or twice a day. Older dogs require more frequent walks for less distance to aid in the reduction of stiffness. For example, a dog over the age of either eight or nine may require three or four ten-minute walks a day. Of course, they may be able to do more than ten minutes without any soreness.

So, how do you really know if your dog is fit or fat? Put your hands on your dog. The ribs should be felt in dogs as well as other bony areas – such as the areas of the spine, shoulder and hips. There should be a small layer of soft tissue over their ribs and bony areas, but you should still be able to feel the areas. Hair can disguise weight gain in dogs and should not be an excuse for an overweight dog. Large dogs should be appropriately large and not giant. For example, a Labrador Retriever should weight between 60 and 80 pounds for a male and between 50 and 70 pounds for a female dog.

So, if your dog does fall into the ‘fat’ category – what can you do? Initially, make an appointment with your veterinarian to discuss your weight loss goals with your dog. Metabolic reason such as hypothyroidism may be the reason for portions of your dog’s weight gain. A simple blood test is all that is needed to test for hypothyroidism. Additional blood work can be performed to look for any other diseases as well.

Then discuss the type of food your dog is on and a realistic option. There are many weight loss products on the market, or you may simply need to cut back on your dog’s present food.

The snacks and types of snacks given to dogs should be evaluated. Dogs do not ‘need’ to eat a treat before bed or right after they come in from a walk, potty break or other activity. We have trained dogs to eat when they are not hungry – this is a human quality. Dogs can be untrained to expect a treat and trained to expect a scratch on the head or a pat on the back. Low calorie treats should be utilized and include vegetables, air popped popcorn, pieces of kibble, and reduced fat cheese.

Exercise is a necessity for every dog – especially the dog trying to lose weight. Start out slow with frequent, short walks if the dog is not accustomed to walking. Two to three, ten to fifteen-minute walks per day is a good start for most dogs. Your dog will feel better with the exercise and so will you! Progressions of ten to fifteen percent can be made each week as long as the dog is not having any problems.

Obesity in dogs is becoming a huge problem in the United States and we really only have ourselves to blame. And the problem is causing dogs to have shortened lives as well as serious health risks. We can alter this problem with proper nutrition, ample exercise and regular health checks. Dogs give so much to us and this is the least we can do for them.

Ownership statistics are gathered from APPM’s 2007/2008 National Pet Owners Survey Wolfsheimer, KJ. *Obesity*. In: *Ettigner SJ, Fedlman EC., editors. Textbook of veterinary internal medicine. 5th edition. WB Saunders Company; Philadelphia (PA): 2000.*

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