

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



STAYING IN SHAPE



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

As with people, dogs need a combination of a healthy diet and regular exercise to stay in shape and live a long and healthy life.



Feeding your dog

There is a bewildering choice of dog food available in pet shops, supermarkets and from your vet, so how do you decide which is best?

Complete dry foods come in many types and the better ones have a variety of life stage options, for puppies through to old age. These are balanced diets and should not be mixed with anything else, so they are an easy and convenient way of meeting all your dog's nutritional needs.

Wet food is normally in tins, foil trays or pouches. It is usually palatable but smells stronger than dry food, and open packages will attract flies in warm weather unless covered and refrigerated, therefore, it can be inconvenient if you are travelling. Some wet foods are complete and so do not need anything added, but others are complementary and need to be combined with a mixer biscuit or meal. Read the package carefully to determine which type you have.

Some people like to feed homemade diets prepared from foods such as raw or cooked butchers' meat, fish, bread, rice and added vitamins and minerals – this is the most complicated way of feeding dogs and is unlikely to provide a balanced diet, so it is best avoided.

Whatever your choice of food for your dog, all dogs must have constant access to clean drinking water.

Puppies up to one year old

Puppies need a food which will support their enormous need for calories and important nutrients for growth. Many companies produce puppy or growth diets and it is important to feed these to young growing dogs. Puppies' stomachs are relatively small, so they need several small meals each day.

- Six to 12 weeks, four meals daily
- 12 to 20 weeks, three meals daily
- 20 weeks onwards, two meals daily

The quantity you need to feed depends on the size and age of your puppy. Use the feeding guide on the food package and start by feeding the smallest recommended quantity for the age and size of your puppy. Increase this only if your puppy starts to look thin. Puppy fat is not a good thing, as a fat puppy is likely to become a fat adult with a number of serious health implications in later life.

Each meal should be the same and should be either a complete dry growth diet or wet puppy food.

Never feed puppies milk or other dairy products as they cannot digest them properly and so are likely to cause diarrhoea. Puppies have no need for milk once they have left their mother.

Large and giant breeds require growth diets for longer than the toy and small breeds, so you may need to continue to feed a growth diet until your dog is as much as 18 months old, depending on the breed. If you are unsure, your vet will be able to advise.



Adult dogs

Once your dog reaches adulthood, you can change from a growth diet to a normal adult dog food. There are choices of dry food or wet, but the important thing is to find a food that suits your dog and stick to it.

If you have to change your dog's diet, do so over a few days, gradually introducing the new food and reducing the old – this will minimise the risk of a stomach upset. Changing flavours of the same brand of food should not normally cause any problems.

Feed the smallest quantity recommended for your size of dog and increase this only if the dog begins to look thin. A lean dog is likely to live longer, have more energy and be much less prone to disease than a dog allowed to become overweight.

When you look at your dog from above, you should see a waistline, and be able to feel the ribs easily when you stroke lightly. The ribs should not be easily visible unless the dog is a naturally thin breed such as a whippet or greyhound.

What if my dog does not eat?

Assuming that your dog is lively and healthy, there is no need to worry if a couple of meals are missed. However, if a dog that usually has a good appetite suddenly stops eating, or has symptoms such as diarrhoea, contact your vet for advice.

If your dog regularly leaves food, you may be feeding too much, so reduce the quantity and do not increase it until you reach a point where the dog is clearing the bowl each meal. Many dogs will not eat all they need in one feed, so it is best to feed adult dogs two small meals daily.

Dogs do not need variety and if they are given a lot of choice, may become picky, so start as you mean to go on and offer the same type of food at every meal. Simply put the food down and leave your dog for 15 minutes to eat it. After this time, remove the bowl and praise the dog if all or most of the food has been eaten. If the dog has not eaten much, just remove the food and throw away whatever is left. Do not be tempted to make a fuss and do not offer anything else to eat. It is very easy for your dog to learn that not eating is a good way to gain your attention and they will train you quickly if you give in!

Neutering

Many people believe that neutering makes dogs fat. This is not the case, but neutered dogs do need fewer calories so, after your dog is neutered, reduce the food given by about a quarter until you see what effect neutering has had. If your dog begins to lose weight, you can gradually increase the food again.

Older dogs

As dogs get older, nutritional needs change. In general, they need fewer calories and may also require other changes to their diet if they are starting to develop any illness associated with ageing (such as kidney or heart disease). Your vet will be able to advise regarding specific illness but, in general, you need to feed less food and should consider changing to a complete food specifically for older dogs. This is a time when you will need to watch your dog's weight carefully to prevent middle age spread! Older dogs should not be any fatter than young adults and are more prone to arthritis and other conditions that will be worsened by being overweight.



Treats

All dogs enjoy treats, but all treats contain calories. This means you need to think about how many, and what type of treats you give, when deciding how much to feed your dog. If your dog has more treats than normal one day, reduce the amount of food given that day to compensate. Low calorie treats are available and, if your dog is prone to weight gain, these are a sensible option. You can also make your dog earn treats by using a treat ball, or giving treats only as part of a play or training exercise.



Exercise

All dogs need exercise to keep fit and healthy. Their exercise needs change with age and vary depending on their breed and size. It is not true that large dogs need more exercise than small dogs. It helps to think about what dogs were originally bred for when determining the quantity and type of exercise they need.

For example, greyhounds are sprinters, so will benefit more from two short off-lead runs per day than one long lead walk. Terriers are bred to sniff out vermin and will enjoy off-lead exercise sniffing and digging. Retriever breeds will usually enjoy playing fetch games with a favourite toy.

Active dogs such as border collies need lots of mental stimulation as well as physical exercise, and it is a good idea to consider activities such as agility or obedience classes to keep them stimulated and to prevent them becoming fat, bored, problem dogs.

All dogs benefit from being off the lead for exercise, because human walking speed is not a natural pace for dogs. Dogs will get much more out of 30 minutes off the lead in a safe, traffic-free environment, than they will from a 30 minute walk along a pavement on a lead.

To be able to let your dog off the lead, you need to be sure he will come back when called (see *the All About Pets leaflet, Training (D16)*). Remember to take and use a pooper-scooper whenever you take your dog out.

Puppies need controlled exercise to keep them occupied and to build strong muscles. However, puppies' bones are still soft and joints are still developing, so hard exercise and games that make them twist and turn suddenly are not advisable, especially for large breeds. In between periods of exercise, puppies need plenty of time to sleep.

Healthy adult dogs will determine their own exercise needs to some extent but, as with people, they need to build up exercise tolerance gradually. Do not expect them to walk ten minutes per day all year and then go on ten kilometre hikes when you go on holiday for a week.

Exercise for older dogs

Dogs still enjoy a walk well into old age and it is important they continue to get regular gentle exercise to keep them mobile and fit. They may not walk as far, but still enjoy the opportunity to go for short walks.

If you decide to get a young dog as company for an old one, do make sure they are exercised separately sometimes, as their exercise needs will be very different.

Remember that when you exercise your dog, you are also helping to keep yourself fit too!

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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