

Weight loss in dogs

Weight loss is tough for anyone—two- or four-legged. However, losing weight and getting in shape not only add years to your pet's life, but they also make those extra years more enjoyable. Helping your cuddly canine shed a few pounds may be easier than you think. It simply requires understanding the importance of weight loss and fitness, paying attention to detail, and seeking assistance from your veterinary team.

Why a healthy weight is important for your dog

If a dog is just five pounds over its ideal weight, it's at risk for developing some serious medical conditions. When a dog is overweight or obese, it's not a question of if it will develop a related illness, but rather how many and how soon. Some of the common disorders associated with excess weight include:

- Type 2 diabetes
- Osteoarthritis
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Many forms of cancer, especially intra-abdominal cancers

Veterinarians expect overweight and obese dogs to live shorter lives than their fitter counterparts. Heavy dogs tend to be less energetic and playful. It's common to think dogs that lie around are just lazy, making it easy to overlook the lethargy that results from being overweight or obese. If your dog doesn't run and jump, it might be overweight. But don't worry, your veterinary team can help your pooch get in shape.

Start with calories

A weight-loss formula seems simple: fewer calories, in plus more calories, out equals weight loss. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. First, never put your dog on a diet until it's been examined by your veterinarian. A medical condition, such as hypothyroidism, hyperadrenocorticism, or Cushing's disease, may be causing your dog's excess weight. The veterinarian will rule out these diseases before putting your dog on a diet. Too many dogs start a diet and fail simply because overeating and lack of activity weren't the problem—a disease was.

Once the veterinarian prescribes a diet, the next step is calculating the calories your dog needs. First, the veterinarian will calculate your dog's ideal weight. If your dog has a lot of weight to lose, your veterinarian may strive for an initial target weight that's higher than your dog's ideal weight. A safe guideline for dogs is losing 3 percent to 5 percent body weight per month under a doctor's supervision. Your veterinarian will use your dog's initial target or ideal weight to figure out how many calories your dog should eat each day.

After you and your veterinarian have determined how much your dog should eat, next you must decide what it should eat and how often. For many dogs, it's best to offer diet food several times a day. Remember, it's vital to count calories during a weight-reduction program. If you feed too much, your dog won't lose weight. If you feed too little, your dog could get sick. To figure out how many calories are in your pet's food, check the label. If it doesn't tell you what you need to know, visit petobesityprevention.com and click on "Food and Calories."

The art of changing foods

You'll most likely need to offer your dog a diet food if it's overweight. When you're introducing a new food, allow several days for the transition. We recommend gradually adding the new diet over a one- to two-week period. Start by substituting one-quarter of your dog's diet with the new food for two or three days. Then give your dog a diet that's half old food, half new for the next two to four days. Then increase to feeding three-quarters new food for the final three to five days before completely switching to the new diet. To make dry food more appetizing for your dog, try warming the food, adding ketchup or oregano, or even adding a splash of an omega-3 fatty acid supplement or salmon juice on top of the food.