Dog nutrition
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What is special about dog nutrition?

As a balanced diet plays an important part in maintaining your dog’s health and vitality, it is important that you familiarise yourself with some of the basics of dog nutrition.

Dogs’ nutritional requirements are different from those of humans – what is good for us is not necessarily good for your dog. Additionally, requirements can vary depending on the age, size and lifestyle of a dog. Fortunately, nowadays it is easy to cater for all those different needs with different types of food.
Life stages and lifestyles

Nutritional needs of dogs vary throughout their lives but also with respect to their lifestyles and conformation (breed). Thankfully, modern, premium, complete diets have been formulated to take into account these varying needs.

Puppies are growing fast and need plenty of nutritional building blocks to develop in a steady and controlled manner. This is also the time when feeding ‘habits’ and ‘fussiness’ can start. The best timing of transition from puppy to adult food will differ depending on the brand of the food and the breed of the dog. For certain types of dog, ideal nutrition in puppyhood is especially important. For example, large and giant breeds of dog are prone to a condition called OCD (osteochondritis dissecans) which is a form of arthritis that affects young dogs (see information sheet on Osteochondrosis). This occurs for a number of reasons, of which nutrition is one important factor. Perhaps surprisingly, certain nutrients need to be very slightly restricted in these breeds to prevent growth spurts which damage the formation of joints. On such a properly regulated diet, the dog will still develop to the same weight and size once adult but with a reduced risk of developing OCD. It is also for this reason that we strongly recommend against dietary supplements including vitamin tablets, rice pudding, Weetabix and crushed egg shells!

Small breed dogs can find standard dog biscuits ‘a bit of a mouthful’, so some diets are formulated specifically for small breeds with a smaller kibble.

Working dogs and very energetic dogs may need to be fed on a rich high-performance diet, whereas dogs with a more sedate lifestyle need food that is lower in calories. Working dogs may also need to have their diet varied depending on the season. In addition, some dogs can be prone to weight gain despite plenty of exercise and the owners best efforts with feeding. These types of dog may benefit from a calorie controlled (or light) diet.

Old dogs need fewer calories than energetic youngsters, and they often require food that is easy to digest, because their digestive systems may not work so effectively any more. Food for senior dogs often contains less protein and reduced levels of certain minerals, but may have a higher content of other vitamins and fatty acids.

There is a fantastic array of diets available, and some even cater for specific breeds. Please feel free to discuss your dog’s diet with us at your next consultation.

Prescription diets

There are many special diets available to help dogs with certain types of disease such as kidney problems or arthritis. Many such foods are available only on prescription as their nutrient content can be very different from that of normal food – this is similar to the situation in humans who have certain health problems and who have to keep to a strict diet.

So while to us most dog foods look and smell alike, there can be vast differences in their quality and content. Please contact us for advice if you are unsure about what to feed your individual dog.

Types of food

The easiest and safest way to cater for all your dog’s nutritional needs is to feed a complete diet – such diets are available in moist form (e.g. tins) or as dry food. The large pet food companies do a great deal of research to develop dog foods that are aimed at optimal nutrition and, as a result, many dogs eat a more balanced diet than the majority of humans! Feeding a complete diet is what we strongly recommend, and these days it is easy to find excellent food your dog.

It is very difficult to prepare a well balanced diet for dogs at home – unintended mistakes can lead to serious problems if they result in an unbalanced diet being fed over a long period of time. Cooking destroys some of the nutrients, but on the other hand feeding raw food can lead to infections such as toxoplasmosis and salmonellosis, some of which can potentially be transmitted to humans (See Zoonoses in dogs and cats information sheet). Dogs fed on raw food are also more prone to getting worms and other parasites. Table scraps should never be fed to dogs because they are not nutritionally balanced and usually have a salt content which is much too high. Some common ingredients can even be toxic to dogs, e.g. raisins can cause kidney failure in dogs.

What is better – wet or dry food?

Any good quality complete food, whether wet or dry will provide everything a dog needs in its diet.

Dry food comes in kibbles of various shapes and sizes. Crunching hard kibbles can help to slow down the development of dental tartar and tooth decay. There is even dry food specifically manufactured to clean teeth during eating. Unlike wet food, a dry diet is very concentrated and a little goes a long way – this can sometimes lead owners to feed too much, thinking that the advised amount cannot possibly be enough. A drawback of wet diets is that they tend to encourage the development of tartar, so dental hygiene measures such as tooth brushing are recommended for dogs on moist food. If you feed dry food, make sure it is a complete food and not a ‘mixer’ food that is supposed to be mixed with wet food.

Once you know the advantages and disadvantages of dry and wet food, you can decide what you prefer. Providing that a good quality, appropriate food is chosen, your dog will get a balanced diet on wet, or dry food or a mixture of both. Whichever type of diet you opt for, it is important that fresh water is always available.
How often do dogs need to be fed?

Small puppies can be fed four times daily until they are about 16 weeks old (See section on Looking after your puppy). Afterwards meals can be reduced to three times daily and eventually to once or twice daily. The majority of dogs would happily consume amazing amounts of food if allowed to, and it is rarely possible to leave food down at all times and let the dog decide how much to eat. It is therefore necessary to keep to regular mealtimes with measured amounts of food.

Many dogs beg for treats and it is good to remember that dogs who are never ever successful when they are begging will soon stop doing it. On the other hand, they only need to be successful once when begging and from then onwards they will put all their efforts into persuading you that they are about to starve unless they have some treats right now! It is difficult not to succumb to the temptation of giving a treat, but it is even more difficult to slim a dog later when he or she has become overweight.

My dog is too heavy. Is this a problem, and if so, what can I do?

Unfortunately obesity is all too common in dogs in the UK these days. Overweight dogs are more prone to health problems such as heart disease or arthritis. In common with the situation in people, slim dogs generally live much longer than overweight dogs. It is therefore important to keep an eye on your dog’s waistline.

Dogs do not automatically become overweight after being spayed or castrated, they only become overweight when they take in too many calories. Many owners feel that the advised daily amount a dog should eat cannot possibly be enough – this is especially true for small dogs when the correct amount to feed does not look like much when it sits in the bowl. It is important to remember that, in the majority of cases, dogs are much smaller creatures than us – they should not and cannot eat an amount that looks sufficient for us! Modern dog food also tends to be quite concentrated and a little goes a long way. Many feeding guides on food packets overestimate what a dog needs, so you may find that your dog needs to eat considerably less than is advised on some packets.

Once it is obvious that your dog is too heavy it is advisable to discuss the situation with your veterinary surgeon. There are numerous ways to reduce your dog’s weight and it is necessary to find one that fits in with your life and suits your dog. In some cases just a reduction of the normal food can be enough, in other cases specific diets are more advisable. A slow gradual approach is usually more successful than a ‘crash-diet.’ While it is beneficial to increase the activity of a dog, it is very difficult to slim an overweight dog just by increasing its activity. The best thing is to work out a diet plan with your vet, and to keep in regular contact with the vet to adjust the plan as necessary. As dogs are very individual, the dietary approach and calorie restriction that causes significant weight loss in one dog may not help another dog at all. Do not be disheartened in that case, it just means that your dog needs a different approach.

For very difficult cases there is even medication to help with slimming. This cannot take the place of a good diet however, as it is only suitable for short term use but it can help with getting started. There is no such thing as a dog that cannot lose weight!

My dog is ill, should I change the food?

Diet can play an important part in the treatment and management of disease. It is therefore possible that we will advise you to change the food or avoid certain products if your dog is ill. What changes should be made and for how long depends very much on what is wrong with your dog. Many of the prescription diets are manufactured to help dogs with very specific problems, and they may not be appropriate for a healthy pet. It may therefore be necessary to separate dogs with different nutritional needs during meal times. While a change of diet is often necessary, especially in chronic diseases, it is important to introduce a new diet gradually and to make sure that your dog keeps eating throughout and does not refuse to eat food for significant periods of time.

Some dogs, especially the toy breeds, can be a bit difficult when it comes to changing their food, but there are several ways to achieve this, and we are happy to advise you how to encourage your dog to eat a new diet.

If you have any queries or concerns regarding your dog’s diet, please do not hesitate to contact us.