

VETERINARY ASSOCIATES OF CAPE COD

COMMON CONDITIONS IN SENIOR DOGS: OBESITY

Nutrition is a key factor in the health of aging dogs, and the nutritional needs of dogs change as they age. While obesity is a common health problem for all dogs, older dogs are more likely to be overweight due to decreased activity and reduced daily energy needs. Obesity increases the risk of serious diseases and health problems such as diabetes, cardiovascular, respiratory, and musculoskeletal disorders. A study done by Purina also showed that, on average, lean animals live 1-2 years longer than obese animals.

Although some medical conditions (especially metabolic diseases like an underactive thyroid gland) can cause obesity, over-feeding generally is the culprit. As a senior dog's metabolism slows, caloric needs decline. If you do not adjust the food intake of your older dog, weight gain is likely to result. If your pet is already overweight, a weight loss program should be considered. First, however, have your dog thoroughly evaluated by your veterinarian to identify any medical problems that could be causing weight gain.

Generally, recommendations for weight loss in senior dogs are very similar to recommendations for people seeking to lose weight. Program steps include:

- **Portion control:** Make sure to follow the guidelines outlined on your pet's food bag. Always make sure to use a 1 cup measuring cup so that you can be sure you are measuring out the food appropriately. If your pet is used to "grazing" throughout the day, you can figure out your pet's daily requirements and then offer $\frac{1}{2}$ that amount in the morning and $\frac{1}{2}$ in the evening.



- **Treats:** One of the biggest mistakes that clients make is offering their pets too many treats. Jerky treats and milk bones are rather like getting a candy bar with every treat. Instead, you should try offering healthy alternatives such as baby carrots, snap green beans, ice cubes, apple wedges, plain rice cakes (with no salt or sugar added), or even just 4-5 pieces of their daily allotted kibble per day. You can also make healthy treats by mixing plain canned pumpkin and non-fat plain yogurt in equal portions and freezing them into bite sized snacks! It is important to remember that even too much of a good thing can be bad, so still offer these healthier treats in moderation. **Please stay away from grapes, onions, macadamia nuts, and raisins as they can be toxic.**
- **The "Green Bean Diet":** Most dogs do enjoy green beans as a treat. As you decrease the amount of kibble that your dog is eating, he or she may act more hungry. You can offer either frozen green beans or no salt added canned green beans along with your pet's meals. This will help to add filler to your pet's diet and allow your pet to feel more full without ingesting too many calories. In general, 1 can of green beans is equivalent to approximately 1 cup of dog food. Therefore, if you decrease your pet's food by $\frac{1}{2}$ cup, then you can offer $\frac{1}{2}$ can of green beans instead.
- **Exercise:** Increasing exercise to burn more calories will also help your pet to lose weight. Please talk with your veterinarian prior to starting an exercise program for your pet.
- **Keep a log:** It may help to modify your own behavior to prevent regaining your pet's lost weight. A daily or weekly log of exercise duration and pet weight yields the best results.

Selecting a food for your senior dog has been made

easier thanks to recent advancements in senior nutrition. Pet foods are now available that have been formulated with fewer calories, more protein, antioxidants, and vitamins to meet the specific nutritional needs of senior dogs, as well as diets formulated especially for weight loss.

Exercise is an important part of a senior dog's weight management program. A simple walk in the park may be just what your senior dog needs to help control weight and stay in shape. Exercise increases energy use and promotes more efficient calorie burning, as well as toning muscles.

Before starting any exercise program with your senior dog, check with your veterinarian to make sure your plans are suited to your pet's physical condition. Then begin slowly, by walking your dog on a leash for 10 minutes per day. Depending on your dog's condition, you can increase each week until you are up to 30 minutes a day of walking. And don't forget—your dog's exercise program can reap health benefits for you, too!