

Corpulent Canines: Why Are So Many Dogs Overweight?

By Chris Zink DVM, PhD, DACVSMR



The summer is over. You spent many healthy weekends outdoors, training and showing your dog. Perhaps during your evenings, you sat out on the deck, consuming healthy things like salads and unsweetened ice tea. If you are like most people, you have taken off some of those pounds that crept on over the winter. You look and feel healthier (even if you are not totally pleased with what the result looks like in a bathing suit). That's one of the advantages of being a human. We get to decide how much we feed ourselves and how much exercise we get.

But our dogs are not so lucky. They depend on us to put food in their bowls. And, more often than not, we are putting in too much! I have assessed the weight on hundreds of dogs representing a variety of breeds at seminars all over North America. A conservative estimate is that about 35 per cent of the dogs I see are overweight; approximately 20 per cent are seriously overweight – enough to endanger their health. These are not couch potatoes, but dogs that jump in obedience, run over rough ground in retrieving tests, and twist and turn on agility courses. Canine athletes that have excess body fat carry a higher risk of musculoskeletal problems such as ruptured anterior cruciate ligaments, early onset of arthritis and degenerative disk disease.

Why are so many dogs overweight? The following are some possible answers to this difficult question:

1) Keeping a dog at working weight may be incompatible with winning in conformation.

I have never understood why dogs whose breed standard states that they should be shown in “hard working condition” don’t win in the conformation ring unless they are fat. If someone knows the answer to this question, I would very much like to hear it. In the meantime, for breeds such as Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers, assume that if your dog is winning in the conformation ring, it is probably about eight to 15 pounds overweight. If you have a young dog that you wish to show in conformation as well as other performance sports, keep him lean and train and compete in the other performance sports until he is mature and ready to win in conformation. Then fatten him up for the breed ring, let him take the conformation world by storm, and then put him on a diet before you go back to competing in the more strenuous performance sports.

2) People feed their adult dogs the same amount of food they fed them as adolescents.

This is a common mistake. But just as most of us eat less now than we did as teenagers, your adult dog needs less too. A dog's metabolism slows down with maturity and adult dogs need less food to maintain their weight.

3) People believe the suggested feeding regimens that are printed on dog-food bags.

Even active dogs don't need the amount of food most dog-food companies recommend. Your dog only needs as much food as will maintain its weight. Two dogs of the same breed and size may require vastly different amounts of food to maintain their weight because there are other factors such as exercise, type of food, etc.

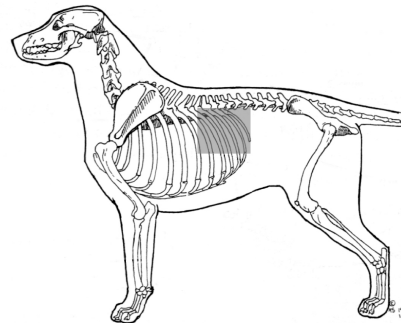
4) The dog has been less active, but is being fed the same amount of food.

Adjust your dog's food intake to its activity level. Remember: In the winter your dog may not get as much exercise, so decrease his intake accordingly. Every time you go to the dog food bag, think about how much exercise your dog has had (not how much exercise he might, possibly, get tomorrow if you get your act together) and dole out the food accordingly.

5) People don't know how to determine whether their dogs are overweight.

This is a very common problem. Dogs vary in height, bone structure and muscularity, so there is no single “correct weight” for a dog of any given breed. The quickest way to determine whether a dog is overweight is to feel the

thickness of the fat over the last few ribs. In this area, the ribs lie right under the skin. If there is any subcutaneous fat, you can feel it between the skin and the ribs. Take your thumb and index finger and pinch deeply into the skin and tissue below. Then pull the tent of skin outward. You will immediately feel the layer of fat slip out from under your fingers (**Figure 1**). In a canine athlete, that layer of fat should be as thin as tissue paper. As you help your dog lose weight, feel that fat layer to monitor weight loss. It's more convenient and just as accurate as using a scale.



Some of you may be reading this and thinking, "I would never want my dog to be that skinny!" Think about the Olympic athletes. Think about runners in the Olympics 100 meter race. If you want your dog to be an athlete then it is only fair that you do what you can to help him achieve the body that he will need to perform and stay healthy and injury-free for many years.

6) People worry that their dogs will not get enough nutrition if they feed them less.

Premium dog foods are packed with nutrients. If your dog is overweight, unless he has a hormonal problem (e.g., hypothyroidism), he is getting too much nutrition. Cutting back will not put him in jeopardy. Remember: Just like humans, individual dogs vary in their metabolic rate and some dogs just need less food.

7) People don't know how to get their dogs to lose weight without the dog begging for food with that sad-eyed look that says, "I'm hungry."

Try the pumpkin diet. Reduce your dog's regular food by 25 to 30 per cent and replace it with twice that volume of canned pumpkin (not the kind with sugar and spices, ready-made for pies). For example, if you are currently feeding your dog three cups of food, you would instead feed him two cups of food and two cups of canned pumpkin. Dogs love the pumpkin – it has the texture of canned dog food, it provides vitamins and roughage, it makes them feel full (so they don't forage in the backyard for leftovers) and they lose weight! You can also use other low-calorie vegetables if you or your dog prefer. Once your dog has lost the fat, you can gradually increase his intake of dog food, but stop short of feeding the amount he ate when he became overweight. And don't forget to give your dog regular exercise. Not only will the exercise help him lose the excess fat, the muscle mass he'll gain will help maintain his svelte figure long-term.

8) The vet said that the dog was a good weight (or even underweight).

I have asked many vets why they don't tell their clients that their dogs are overweight, and I always get the same answer: "I have lost so many clients because they were offended when I told them their dogs were overweight that I just don't tell them anymore." So please, don't be offended – it doesn't reflect on you personally. Honest. The following is a real-life example of the importance of keeping our canine athletes at the proper weight. Years ago, Julie Daniels, a well-known agility trainer and competitor, was showing her female Rottweiler 'Jessy' in conformation. After she got her first major (five points), Julie decided that she would rather compete with Jessy in agility. Knowing that Rottweilers are not ideally structured for agility, Julie took 21 pounds (yes, 21 pounds – this is not a typo) of fat off the dog. The dog looked healthy and muscular, and in the process lost 1 1/2" in height at the withers. For many dogs this could mean a four-inch difference in jump heights. Jessy became the all-time top-winning Rottweiler in agility and was still healthy and competing (in the Veterans classes) at the age of 10. So why not do this for your best friend?