

Exercise and Diet for Weight Loss

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Q. My 7-year-old yellow Lab, Ramsey, has gained 14 pounds since he was neutered almost two years ago. He weighed 101 pounds for surgery and now weighs 115 pounds. I was trying to get him to lose about 5 pounds before surgery to ease the load on his hips and shoulders. He walks daily. My conventional veterinarian recommended reducing his food even more, which I am not comfortable with. A homeopathic veterinarian gave us some remedies, but there were no visible results from using them. My dog's thyroid checks out okay. I am at a loss as to what to do next.

A. Obesity may be the most common disease I address in my daily practice. You are already several steps ahead of most owners because you recognize your dog is overweight and the importance of correcting the situation.

Obesity can cause or complicate many other conditions, such as arthritis and cardiopulmonary disease, by adding more stress to the already injured body systems. Conversely, painful arthritis and cardiopulmonary disease can contribute to obesity by discouraging the exercise necessary to slim that couch-potato figure. Genetics and hormonal conditions can also cause some dogs to be overweight. Hypothyroidism (low thyroid) is one of the most common contributing factors. More extensive thyroid testing may be needed if Ramsey's situation does not improve.

The most important fact to remember when pursuing a weight-loss program for your dog: Calories burned must exceed calories eaten. You can reduce food, fat and calories or increase exercise. Ideally, it is best to combine the two approaches.

To reduce calories, first eliminate all extra calories - no treats, table scraps, handouts from the neighbors, cat food, or extra food in the bowl because he looked at you with those big brown eyes. Everyone has to know because one cheater can ruin the entire attempt.

Next reduce the calories in the primary diet. You can do this by switching to a lower-calorie version of the food or to a diet food recommended by your veterinarian. Many diet foods have high levels of fiber to maintain a similar volume to non-diet foods and make the dog feel full with fewer calories. It is important to restrict diet foods to the amount recommended - eating too much diet food is still overeating.

Remember that the "light" designation means only that the food has fewer calories than the regular version, not necessarily that it is a diet food.