

Building Blocks to a Healthy Australian Shepherd

Diet information to keep your Aussie healthy.

Jennifer Newton-Doyle

Good, Premium and Superpremium Reading labels may be particularly useful to Aussie owners who find their dogs constantly scratching their eyes, muzzle and feet, all signs of an allergy. Other less common allergic reactions include skin lesions and gastrointestinal upset, Dr. Hawks says. If you suspect an allergy, consult your veterinarian. Some over-the-counter diets cater specifically to dogs with allergies. However, any ingredients that are found in dog food, dogs can be allergic to, Dr. Berryessa warns. For instance, about 20 percent of those dogs with allergies are now allergic to lamb. Once considered a novel protein, lamb-based foods were some of the first alternatives for food-allergic dogs.

The good news is that healthy Australian Shepherds tend to do well on a basic adult maintenance diet until about 9 to 10 years of age, Dr. Berryessa says. At this point, a lower-calorie diet formulated for geriatric dogs may be warranted to avoid weight gain.

Pound for Pound Just as in humans, no single feeding plan ensures that an Aussie maintains its ideal weight, and there is no single weight that's ideal for every dog. An Aussie's ideal weight is that weight at which, when it is wet and you can see its outline clearly, it looks like an hourglass when you look down at its back, Dr. Cochran says. You can easily feel, but not see, its ribs, top of its backbone and top of its hips.

Achieving this weight may take some individual evaluation. Though Australian Shepherds tend to be high-energy dogs that require plenty of exercise, there are more mellow lines, says Carrie Christensen, an Aussie breeder in San Juan Capistrano, Calif. Obviously, the more active the dog, the more food it'll require. I feed dry food and I feed my dogs two cups a day, she says. I've had dogs that require more than that.

Christensen discourages free-feeding Australian Shepherds. People often equate food with love, but they will eat as much as you give them and get fat!

Another consideration when determining the amount of food an Aussie requires is the quality of the food itself. You can either put [money] in the front end or send it out the back end in excess poop and veterinary bills, Dr. Hawks says. If they have a lot of poop, they're probably not digesting the food well. Sometimes, the increased cost of these [premium foods] is worth it in the long run because you feed them less.

Cheaper, carbo-packed dog foods may aggravate behavior problems. One of the biggest problems I see as far as nutrition in young dogs and puppies that eat food that's high in carbs (cereal grains) is a tendency to show symptoms of hyperactivity, says Liz Palika, a dog trainer in Oceanside, Calif., and owner of three Australian Shepherds. Carbs digest in the system to glucose, and many dogs and puppies simply can't handle that. It often shows up in dogs that can't seem to sit or follow directions.

Palika warns that behavior changes don't occur overnight with a diet switch. After a couple of weeks, you should see a calming in the dogs.

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