

Prevent Dog Obesity Naturally

Take a holistic approach to battle your canine companion's weighty problem.

Randy Kidd, DVM, Ph.D.

Obesity has become a huge problem that many veterinarians are calling the No. 1 canine health concern.

Veterinarians estimate 25 percent to more than 50 percent of all dogs are overweight. (One study found 83 percent of all dogs to be overweight.)

Obesity predisposes dogs to a host of problems, including diabetes, bone and joint diseases, heart and lung diseases, urinary and reproductive disorders, skin conditions, anesthetic complications, and a host of different types of cancer. Overweight dogs also tend to live shorter lives.

Perhaps the worst part is that the truly holistic way to “cure” obesity, in almost all cases, is as simple as balancing your dog’s food intake with his level of energy output. In other words, keep your dog’s intake of calories at the level that fuels his energetic activities.

There are medical reasons that may cause your dog to be overweight. And while these represent only a small portion of the total number of overweight dogs, diseases such as hypothyroid, diabetes, and adrenal disease may be contributing factors. (If your dog is overweight, see your veterinarian for a complete physical checkup.)

Exercise

A daily romp in the park goes a long way toward clearing out the fat globules, activating and lubricating the joints, and eradicating boredom (boredom can be a major contributor to overeating).

If your dog is already overweight, be patient but persistent. Take your dog for a once-a-day or twice-a-day walk around the block at first, then gradually add more time to the daily walks until you’re able to march along at a brisk pace for at least 20 to 30 minutes once or twice a day.

Nutrition

There are three major factors to consider when creating a weight-loss diet for obese dogs: dietary restriction, increased fiber, and decreased fat.

The most important of these is to simply cut back on the amount of calories consumed. Many commercially available dog foods are higher than necessary in both fats and carbohydrates. But more importantly, the carbohydrates in many dog foods are refined. Refined carbohydrates tend to make their fatty deposits directly onto the belly and ribs – much like a fast-food, highly-refined diet has been shown to make kids heavier.

The easiest way to lower carbohydrates and still top off your dog’s hunger pangs is to increase the amount of fiber and veggies in his food.

Although it is true that dogs are primarily carnivorous, canines in the wild get plenty of fiber and vegetable matter from the intestinal tracts of animals they eat and from munching on grasses and twigs. So, whereas a dog’s prime dietary ingredient should be meat, additional fiber is a good way to keep the bowels moving (a proven way to help prevent obesity). And, vegetables are an excellent source of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants which all have numerous health benefits.

Oats, in the form of cooked oatmeal, is an excellent source of fiber, and they are also a mild herbal nerve which helps to keep dogs calm. Treats, on other hand, can be a major source of excess calories.

Many foods can also be excessively oily. Unless you live on the tundra and your dogs plan to drag a sled from Anchorage to Nome, shoot for a fat content of about 5 percent on a dry-weight basis.

There are also some nutritional supplements, such as the amino acid L-carnitine, that may help reduce fat deposits and increase lean muscle mass. Check with your vet.

Finally: it's important to keep daily treats to a minimum. If your dog is already overweight, concentrate on helping him lose 10 percent of his excess body weight first, then 10 percent more and so on until he has reached an ideal weight. The best approach to dieting is to take off little bits of weight at a time. The addition of herbs can make the process much easier.

Herbal remedies

In addition to healthy table vegetables such as spinach and broccoli, there are many herbal remedies that help prevent obesity.

When we improve digestion we often help get our dog's feet moving as well as his bowels, and many of the digestive herbs such as cayenne (red pepper) and ginger can help. Sometimes a dog simply needs a little boost to his system to get him up off the couch and start to move about, and cayenne or ginger are also good pep-ups – or whole body tonics – as is ginseng. Finally, if your dog is arthritic, herbal pain killers such as willow bark or meadowsweet may make it easier for him to get up and about.

Note that whenever medicines, herbal or otherwise, are used as the sole means for weight reduction, high dosage levels may cause problems (See sidebar).

Other alternative medicines

Acupuncture has been used to treat obese humans and may be helpful for dogs. Some dogs overeat because they are overly anxious. Calming remedies such as lavender aroma misted into his room may be helpful. Or, try one of the flower essences such as aspen, mimulus, impatiens, or Rescue Remedy. Talk with your holistic veterinarian about these.

I like to think of any of the holistic remedies as gentle helpers for the dog that needs to lose weight; I don't try to find a magic bullet that will magically peel off the pounds. The truest and most reliable weight reducers are exercise and proper diet, coupled with a home environment that is both calming and fun.

Randy Kidd, DVM, Ph.D. has been a practicing veterinarian for more than 30 years, with 20 years of experience in holistic healthcare.

Interested in reading more about holistic care and homeopathic remedies? Go to www.dogworld.com to check out Dog World magazine's latest news.