

Puppy Food

Rules for feeding your puppy.

Kim Campbell Thornton

How often should you feed your puppy for optimal growth? That depends on its age and sometimes its size. There's no hard and fast rule, Dr. Hamil says, but most pups are started on four meals a day after weaning. By the time they're 10 to 12 weeks old, they're eating three meals a day, and by the time they're 4 months old (16 weeks), they're eating twice a day, a regimen that should be continued throughout the dog's life.

Multiple meals aren't always convenient for working owners, however, and Dr. Carey says it's perfectly fine to feed young puppies twice a day. I feed puppies twice a day from the time they've completed weaning all the way to the bitter end, he says. If you want to, you can feed them three times a day until they're 4 months old, then switch to two times a day. In the work we've done, however, we can't see any difference in the puppies or their happiness, play activity, behavior and so forth, if we feed them twice a day versus three times a day. That's after they've completed the weaning process though. When you're weaning them, you may have to feed them three or four times a day for that week. Follow Your Pups Growth That said, small-breed puppies usually need to eat a little more frequently than large-breed puppies. Chihuahuas, for instance, tend to nibble throughout the day, and Chihuahua puppies can be prone to hypoglycemia, or low blood sugar, if they don't eat often enough. Your veterinarian can help you decide what's best for your pup, based on past experience with the breed or similar sized dogs.

Once a puppy of any breed or size reaches 4 to 6 months of age, its rate of growth slows down. They're still growing and they still need extra nutrition, Dr. Laflamme says, but their calorie requirement decreases. That's when it's important for the pet owner to continue monitoring the puppy and adjusting the amount of food accordingly. Puppies are all individuals, and even if a pet owner has two littermates, they may not need to be fed exactly the same way. One puppy may need more and one may need less. Monitoring body condition and feeding to promote healthy growth without creating a fat puppy is best for the puppy in the long run.

Although their growth starts to slow by 6 months of age, puppies still need extra nutrients until they reach full physical maturity. The age at which they meet maturity varies by breed, with some breeds maturing much more rapidly than others. With small dogs, I think you can put many of them on adult diets by the time they're 9 months to a year, Dr. Hamil says. With large breeds, they're really not mature until they're 2 and sometimes even 3 years old. You can keep them on the large-breed puppy diet until they're 2 years old.

For dogs that will have an adult weight of 90 pounds or more, Dr. Carey also recommends keeping them on a puppy diet until they're 2 years old. Most dogs that will weigh less than 90 pounds at maturity can be switched to an adult diet at about 1 year of age. At 12 months, they'll be almost full size from a skeletal standpoint, he says.