

The Benefits of Proper Puppy Nutrition

Give your new puppy the gift of future health and proper growth by following these four principles.

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When your puppy was weaned from his perfect diet of mother's milk, the responsibility for fulfilling his nutritional needs fell to you. Give your new friend the gift of future health and proper growth by feeding him exactly the way he needs to be fed. To do this, you need to know four basic principles of puppy nutrition:

1. Puppy food by any other name could be the same.

A good growth formula doesn't have to come in a bag labeled "Puppy Food," although foods marketed for puppies are fine. "One of the myths is that puppies require [nutrients] adults don't," said Dan Carey, DVM, director of technical communications and a nutrition scientist at the Iams Co. "Puppies need all the same things adults need; they just have higher calorie requirements and, in the case of large dogs, lower calcium requirements." Many foods are not only adequate but excellent for puppies as long as they have been tested for growth, he said, recommending that owners look on the package near the guaranteed analysis statement for information about the food being found "adequate for growth" or adequate for all life stages.

2. Do a balancing act.

The proper balance of nutrients is the most crucial aspect of a puppy's diet, which is why supplementation (with multivitamins, extra calcium or the latest popular vitamin or mineral) should be followed only when recommended by your veterinarian for a specific medical condition. Excessive table scraps and homemade diets can also upset this balance.

3. Understand less is more, more or less!

Puppies need to eat far more calories per pound than an adult dog at least three times as much as an adult of the same weight. They also need to eat more frequently at least three times per day up to 16 weeks of age. Getting enough food is the challenge for some puppies. Others would eat all day long if given the chance, and obesity or a too-quick growth rate would result.

What's a new puppy owner to do? "The food guide on the dog food bag is a good starting point because those amounts have been carefully researched," Carey said. "Then experiment, slowly increasing the amount of food as your puppy grows." (Remember suggested amounts are for an entire day. Divide by three for single-feeding amounts.) Guidelines on the bag are only guidelines, however. "That's just a starting point," said Quinton R. Rogers, Ph. D., and a companion animal nutritionist at the University of California, Davis. "You need to experiment. Feel their ribs. If you can feel them very easily, the puppy is too thin. If you can't feel them, your puppy is too fat."