

Determining puppy's diet

Determining puppy's diet Dr. Suzy Hochgesang Happy Tails

Q: I just adopted a new black Lab puppy, and have been hearing mixed opinions on how long I should feed him puppy food.

He's 11 weeks old right now, and the breeder said to switch him over to adult food in a month, but other people have been saying to keep him on puppy food until he's 6, 12, even 18 months old! I'm confused! What do you recommend?

A: This is a great question, and there might be some merit to each of the opinions offered to you. Let me see if I can clear things up for you.

Many breeders have traditionally recommended feeding large-breed puppies an adult food due to their rapid growth rate. Since adult dog foods tend to be lower in calories than the puppy version, feeding an adult food may help keep your fast-growing puppy from gaining too much weight too quickly.

However, most food companies now have a puppy diet specially formulated for large-breed dogs. Large-breed puppy diets are lower in calorie density than normal puppy diets and are also lower in calcium, both of which are important in keeping your puppy's bones and joints healthy.

Numerous studies have shown that overfeeding large-breed puppies during the phase of rapid growth that occurs post-weaning increases the risk of developing numerous skeletal diseases including hip dysplasia, osteochondrosis, hypertrophic osteodystrophy and Wobbler's syndrome. The higher protein content of puppy foods does not seem to increase the frequency or severity of skeletal abnormalities in large-breed puppies. This means that excess calories during the period of rapid growth, rather than the protein content of the diet, is the factor that interferes with normal skeletal development.

If the total caloric intake was the only factor in determining what kind of diet to feed your puppy, technically it wouldn't matter whether you fed an adult or a puppy diet, as long as your puppy was taking in an appropriate number of calories to prevent excess weight gain. However, there is still more to the picture.

Besides the link between excess calories and the development of skeletal disease, there is also a link between the overfeeding of calcium and incidence of these conditions. Feeding puppies adult foods with a higher percentage of calcium or supplementing a puppy diet with extra calcium also contributes to bone problems in young, rapidly growing dogs. Since puppy diets have a lower percentage of calcium than do adult diets, your puppy's calcium intake will be lower if he eats a puppy food rather than an adult food, even if the total calories are identical.

Therefore, my recommendation is to feed your new puppy a large-breed puppy formula until he reaches 90 percent of his expected adult weight. In large-breed puppies, this usually occurs between 6 months and 9 months of age, while smaller dogs may require puppy food until they are a year or so.

I generally recommend that you follow the feeding guidelines printed on the type of food you are feeding. However, remember that these are just guidelines and are based on the average metabolism of many dogs. Just like people, metabolism can be greatly influenced by genetics and activity, so you may need to adjust the amount you feed your puppy based on his individual metabolism.

The best way to make sure you are feeding your puppy the appropriate amount of food is to assess your dog's Body Condition System score on a weekly basis. To do this, simply look at your dog's profile from the side and from above, and then rub your fingers over his rib cage. Using the BCS chart (see top of page), determine your dog's score. For adult dogs, the ideal score is 5; however, large-breed puppies should be maintained at a score of 4 until they have reached their adult weight.

Remember that treats count toward your puppy's daily intake, too. Especially during puppy training, these treats can start to add up. Treats should never account for more than 10 percent of your puppy's caloric intake.

If you are feeding a high-quality large-breed puppy diet, your puppy's food should be his sole source of nutrition, so you do not need to supplement his diet in any way and be careful not "fill up" your puppy on treats before meal time.

EMACIATED -- Ribs, lumbar vertebrae, pelvic bones and all bony prominences evident from a distance. No discernible body fat. Obvious loss of muscle mass. 2. VERY THIN -- Ribs, lumbar vertebrae and pelvic bones easily visible. No palpable fat. Some evidence of other bony prominence.

Minimal loss of muscle mass. 3. THIN -- Ribs easily palpated and may be visible with no palpable fat. Tops of lumbar vertebrae visible. Pelvic bones becoming prominent. Obvious waist and abdominal tuck. 4. UNDERWEIGHT -- Ribs easily palpable, with minimal fat covering. Waist easily noted, viewed from above. Abdominal tuck evident. 5. IDEAL -- Ribs palpable without excess fat covering. Waist observed behind ribs when viewed from above. Abdomen tucked up when viewed from the side. 6. OVERWEIGHT -- Ribs palpable with slight excess fat covering. Waist is discernible viewed from above but is not prominent. Abdominal tuck apparent. 7. HEAVY -- Ribs palpable with difficulty, heavy fat cover. Noticeable fat deposits over lumbar area and base of tail. Waist absent or barely visible. Abdominal tuck may be present. 8. OBESE -- Ribs not palpable under very heavy fat cover, or palpable only with significant pressure. Heavy fat deposits over lumbar area and base of tail. Waist absent. No abdominal tuck. Obvious abdominal distention may be present. 9. GROSSLY OBESE -- Massive fat deposits over thorax, spine and base of tail. Waist and abdominal tuck absent. Fat deposits on neck and limbs. Obvious abdominal distention.

About the Author

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