

Nutrition for Inactive Adult Dogs

My dog is getting older and he's not as active as he once was. I'm worried that he might get fat. What should I do?

Over 50% of dogs in North America are either overweight or obese, so paying attention to the balance between activity and calorie intake is important. Step one in preventing an aging dog from gaining weight and getting fat is to talk to your veterinarian for guidance about two things:



- What nutrient formulation is most appropriate for this dog at this time in his life?
- What portion should be fed at each meal? Another way to think about this is to calculate a total daily portion and divide it by however many meals are desired.

If your dog has any specific health issues like kidney disease, then he may need to eat a very precise therapeutic nutrient profile in order to remain healthy.

I notice that some dog foods are marked “light” or “lower calorie” or “weight control.” Should I choose one of these foods?

Unfortunately, dog food marketing is filled with statements that sometimes over-promise in weight management. Your veterinarian can help you sort through the hype as you choose a formulation that best fits your dog's needs. The dry matter analysis of dog food formulations provides data that allows for a head-to-head comparison. Dry matter data provides protein levels and fat content, as well as information like the sodium content. It is also important to find out the calorie density – how many calories per cup or per can.



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Once I choose a food that he likes, how do I prevent him from gaining weight?

Once you have chosen a formulation and have calculated a reasonable daily portion based on calorie density, the best way to stay on track and prevent unwanted weight gain is to combine portion control with regular, formal weigh-ins. Regular weigh-ins every 4 to 8 weeks, ideally at the veterinarian's office, provide accountability for portioning and help prevent both unplanned weight gain as well as weight loss.

Are there any snacks I can give that will be OK and not interfere with my plan to keep my dog lean? He really likes snacks!

Be sure to check with your veterinarian about the most appropriate snacks for your dog. That said, it is reasonable to reach for snacks that are natural and low in calorie density. For instance, water-based vegetables are generally good options – green beans, broccoli, and cauliflower all are good choices. Both fresh and frozen veggies will work. Most dogs like frozen vegetables right out of the freezer because they are crunchy and cold. Be careful with carrots as they are high in sugar and a little too calorie-dense for the purpose of weight management. Another "sin free" snack for dogs is air popped popcorn with no butter or salt.

Be careful when choosing treats or snacks from the grocery or pet store shelves. It is worth tracking down the calorie content in order to better calculate how many can/should be offered in a day. This is another opportunity for your veterinarian to provide input and guidance based on the dry matter analysis of the treats you are considering.

Are there any other possible reasons for my dog's inactivity?

Many inactive adult dogs are inactive because they are dealing with a medical issue that prevents them from doing all the things they would otherwise do. For instance, some dogs may have lower stamina

due to an underlying metabolic illness like an underactive thyroid gland (hypothyroidism). This is a straightforward disease to diagnose with bloodwork and to treat with twice daily medication.

Another explanation for inactivity in an adult dog, and a much more common explanation than hypothyroidism, is pain from osteoarthritis (OA). Approximately 20% of all dogs, and 80-90% of aging dogs suffer from painful OA. It is easy for dog owners to mistakenly presume that the signs of OA are simply signs that the dog is “getting old.”



This is an easy mistake to make because:

- Dogs tend to be very stoic about their pain. They will mask their pain as they try to do everything they have always done. As their OA progresses, their activity will decrease over time.
- OA is an insidious disease that progresses over time, so the signs develop gradually. Losing the ability to be active, losing stamina, losing interest in family activities – all are potential signs of pain.

Other metabolic diseases can also be responsible for decreased stamina including:

- Congestive heart failure
- Addison’s disease (hypoadrenocorticism)
- Cushing’s disease (hyperadrenocorticism)
- Laryngeal paralysis
- Chronic respiratory disease

Every inactive adult dog should be evaluated for OA and other metabolic diseases that can contribute to decreased energy, decreased stamina, and decreased activity. If they are ill and get diagnosed and treated appropriately, they may not be inactive for long!

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