

How Much to Feed Your Pet

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If you live in Western Europe, the chances are that anytime you switch on your radio or TV, you will be bombarded about the “obesity” crisis in humans. This trend which is directly related to poor or badly managed diets, is also now trending at an alarming rate in “pet health”.

As veterinarians, we are seeing more and more pet related weight issues, which are often as a result of confusion regarding the amount and type of food which should be fed to pets.

In broad terms, a pet is like a human, in that they are individuals. No two pets are identical, and in that sense their specific dietary needs will also be different. When we wonder how much food we should feed a pet, it is important to remember that the age, breed, size, activity level and actual feed type will influence this decision. For example, younger and smaller breeds of dogs require a lot more calories than an older dog will. Likewise, people are often surprised to hear that smaller breeds require more calories per pound body weight than larger breeds need!

Without doubt, many owners now choose commercial dog foods, which come pre-packed and with ready to use instructions. Many have “feeding guidelines” attached to the product information, advising how much of the food a pet should be fed. It is important to realise that such guidelines “assume” that all pets of a certain weight require the same amount of food. As a rough guideline this is acceptable, however as a specific measure for your individual pet, it can be misleading. Therefore, I always advise that the individual pet owner is by far and away best positioned in deciding how much food their pet should receive. Starting at the lower end of the “recommended daily amount” as described on the packaging and monitoring your pet’s bodyweight over time is a good approach.

As a general rule of thumb, as an owner, you should be able to run your fingers over your pet’s ribcage and feel the ribs. A slight covering of fat over the ribs indicates an ideal body weight. In cases where the rib out line cannot be felt or is indeed difficult to make out, it is worth discussing a dietary plan with your veterinary surgeon. Similarly, an underweight pet will have very prominent ribs and may show other signs of under feeding. It should also be borne in mind that some medical conditions can manifest in such ways and underlying clinical issues should always be first excluded.

Puppies when suckling, will consume milk from their mother as often as they need it. At 3 - 4 weeks old, solid food is introduced often in pellet form. These pellets can be mixed with warm water to form a soft mash which can be fed 3 times daily. Once the puppies reach 5 - 6 months old, they can be fed twice daily. It is important to realise that over feeding in the hope of assisting puppies to grow faster, can in fact be detrimental. This can lead to growth defects in large breeds in particular.

At one year old, we describe our pets as “mature” adults. They will not grow much more physically in stature beyond this stage. Hence, it is fair to assume that their dietary requirements should become well established at that point. Some breeds are very active, and for such their calorific demands will be greater. It is advisable to feed such active dogs more when a period of exertion is expected. Do not feed immediately before or after intense work, as doing so can lead to intestinal disorders. Hard working dogs should receive the bulk of their food one hour or more after the last bout of exercise.

Older more senior dogs will not require as many calories as they did in younger years. Therefore, it is a good idea to monitor the daily intake as excess weight can accumulate quickly.

For cats, it is important to change the diet more slowly. Digestive upsets can occur more easily than in dogs. I like the one quarter every 4 days rule! On day one feed 75% of the original food mixed with 25% of the new food. Four days later feed 50% of each food mixed. Four days later feed 75% of the new food and 25% of the older food. And finally, after another 4 days feed 100% of the new food only. This allows the cat's intestinal tract to become acclimatised to the new type of food.

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