



## Pudgy Dogs

... Help your dog lose those extra pounds

**D**o you know anyone that has a health problem that could shorten his life and increase his chances of joint disease, diabetes, skin and breathing problems, as well as cancer? If your dog is among the 25-30% of companion animals in the U.S. who are overweight or obese, then the answer is yes. The number of pets carrying a few (or many) extra pounds has never been higher. Fortunately this problem is entirely preventable with the right weight-loss strategy.

### Is my pet overweight?

Animals are considered overweight if they are 10-19% above their ideal body weight, and obese if they are greater than 20% above their ideal body weight. Ideal body weights vary greatly even within dog breeds, but your veterinarian can recommend an ideal weight for your dog. There are certain risk factors that can contribute to obesity, including age, gender (altered animals are more likely to be obese due to decreased metabolic rate and activity), genetics, and lifestyle.

### Lean animals actually have a longer lifespan.

In general, your dog should have a visible waist, palpable ribs with a slight fat covering, and an abdomen that is slightly "tucked up" when viewed from the side. If it is hard to feel your dog's ribs and she has visible fat deposits on/under her abdomen or rolls of fat around her neck, back, and the base of her tail, she is most likely overweight or obese.

### Consequences of obesity

Dogs, like humans, can develop an array of health problems related to being overweight or obese. These include increased risk of heart failure, cancer, diabetes, arthritis, anesthetic complications, exercise intolerance, and skin and respiratory problems. Lean animals actually have a longer lifespan. After successful completion of a weight loss plan, many pet guardians report that the formerly obese animal acts years younger and has much more energy.

### Four steps for successful weight loss

Identify and accept the problem. If you believe your pet is overweight, you have completed the first step of the weight loss plan. If you are not sure or have any concerns that your pet may have an underlying medical condition (such as low thyroid hormone level or diabetes), you should visit your vet before starting a weight loss plan.

Record everything your dog is eating, including all pet food, people food, and treats (including rawhides, dental chews, etc). Once you have a good idea of what you are feeding your dog, you can devise a plan for the third step.

Reduce the number of calories fed. You should be able to use the nutritional information on the packaging from your dog's food to figure out his current calorie intake. There are many formulas that vets use to calculate how many calories an animal should consume. These formulas take into account the animal's age, gender, and species. Your vet can customize a plan for your pet using these formulas.

If you would like to start your pet's weight loss plan before your next vet visit, follow three basic guidelines. Feed about 80% of the current number of calories. Only 10% of the calories fed should come from human food/treats. Your pet should lose 0.5% to 2.0 % of his body weight per week. The

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easiest thing to do is simply decrease the amount of food fed without changing the type of food. Feed multiple (at least two) small meals per day to increase your pet's metabolism and decrease feelings of hunger. However, your dog may still appear "always hungry," and you may need to switch to a weight-loss food.

Weight loss foods vary, but most have restricted calories and/or increased fiber. If you do elect to change your pet's food, do so gradually over a period of about one week. If you try an over-the-counter weight loss food and your pet does not lose weight, you should consult your veterinarian about using a prescription diet. If more than 10% of your



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dog's daily calories come from treats or human food, you will need to reduce the amount of treats you are feeding. You may also want to try a low fat treat like baby carrots, plain popcorn or rice cakes.

The fourth step in the weight loss plan is to gradually increase exercise. Try longer walks or play sessions, enrolling in a class like agility or doggy dance, or take your water lover swimming. Weigh your dog every 1-2 weeks to ensure that she is actually losing weight, and that she is not losing weight too quickly. If your pooch stays pudgy or you have any questions, consult your family veterinarian. 🐾



**Emilia Gordon, DVM** is Medical Director of the Berkeley-East Bay Humane Society (BEBHS). BEBHS is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to placing homeless animals with committed caretakers; to developing healthy relationships between pets and people through education, training and counseling; and to promoting the humane treatment of all animals. In addition to housing an animal shelter, BEBHS operates a veterinary hospital offering comprehensive, affordable care to the public with proceeds benefiting shelter animal medical care.

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