

Is Fluffy A "Salad Dodger"?

Obesity In Dogs

By Belinda Thomas

I own Labradors and when people see my dogs for the first time, I'm often met with the comment of "Oh, they are thin, for Labradors, aren't they?" This offends me to no end, as I do not consider my dogs to be thin - they are a perfect working weight and are in fact how the breed is supposed to look. I have met a number of Labrador owners, who's dogs are overweight, it seems acceptable for them to be obese because "they are Labradors", and hence prone to it, so therefore it's really not the owners fault that their dog is overweight - wrong! Let me also say, that as an instructor, I have come across all sorts of different breeds who could lose a kilo or six. There seems to be a common misconception, that a 'fat' dog is a healthy and happy dog. This is not the case, in fact it can have some various serious effects on your dogs' health.



Dogs can become overweight for a number reasons. Whether it is because of simple overfeeding or as a result of a medical condition, the bottom line is the same: the dog is taking in more calories than he is able to burn. We, humans, are the main cause of obesity in our dogs. How many of you have been conned by the 'puppy dog' eyes and thought "ag shame, Fluffy is still hungry" and fed him another bowl of kibble, or even worse a piece of chicken off your plate?

There are some common diseases and conditions which can contribute to your dog being overweight, which I will discuss below:

THE TYPE & AVAILABILITY OF FOOD

My German Shepherd, Max will only eat what he needs. On the other hand, my two Labradors, Murphy and Scout, will eat as much as is available and then still look for more. Max is a picky eater, but, Murphy and Scout will eat anything and everything. The amount and type of food that is fed and the eating habits of the dog play a big part in how likely it is that your dog will become overweight. Max is very unlikely to become overweight - even without monitoring his food intake. However, my Labradors just have to look at food and they gain weight, so I have to carefully measure out what they get.

The type of food you feed your dog has a direct bearing on the tendency for a dog to become overweight. Table scraps, excessive treats, even premium high-energy dog foods can contribute to obesity. Murphy is seven years old - his day consists of snoozing in the sun and generally lazing around. If he feels like it he may take a saunter around the garden. He doesn't need a high energy diet. Whereas, his sister, Scout, who is a high drive working dog and competes in a number of dog sport disciplines, high energy needs, so she needs a high energy food.

YOUR DOGS' ACTIVITY LEVEL:

Your dogs' activity level plays a big role in determining the caloric needs of your dog and therefore also his tendency to become obese. An active dog will use more calories. Also, an active dogs' mental state may make him less likely to eat because of boredom or stress.

STERILISATION:

Neutering or spaying your dog slows their metabolism, meaning that they need fewer calories than intact dogs.

Since their energy needs are less, by feeding them the same as we would feed intact dogs, they will gain weight. In truth, most sterilised dogs are often overfed and under-exercised, and are twice as likely to become obese than intact dogs. **Sterilisation, itself does not cause obesity**, it is how we care for the dogs afterwards that predisposes them to becoming overweight.

GENES AND BREED PREDISPOSITIONS:

There are some breeds that are prone to obesity. But, this doesn't mean that all dogs of that breed will become overweight, but it does mean that owners of those breeds need to be particularly vigilant about monitoring their dogs weight. Breeds prone to becoming overweight include: Labradors, Dachshunds, Beagles amongst others. Some breeds do have a lower tendency for obesity. I've never seen an overweight Whippet, but I'm sure that it does happen.

AGE

Dogs tend to become obese when they are between the ages of 2 and 12 years. As dogs come into their "Senior Years", the likelihood of becoming overweight decreases. Generally, young dogs are less likely to be overweight, as they are normally more active and have high energy needs as they are growing. If your dog is overweight under the age of two, this is a very serious warning sign. This dog will have a tendency to be overweight for the rest of his life, so he must be put onto a weight reduction program as soon as possible and his weight vigilantly monitored.

MEDICATION

Some medications can also influence your dogs metabolism and appetite - the most common is Cortisone. Check this with your vet, if your dog is taking any prescribed medication.

There are some medical factors that can also contribute to obesity, such as: Hypothyroidism and Diabetes. However, according to vets, these account for only 5% of the causes of obesity cases.

PREVENTING OBESITY

It is far easier to prevent your dog from becoming overweight in the first place than taking off the extra weight once it is there. To stop excess weight, feed your dog according to his age and activity level. Normally younger dogs need more calories per kilogram of body weight than older dogs. To maintain optimum weight we need to:

1. EXERCISE

Exercise has a lot of benefits. It not only helps to burn calories but it also:

- Strengthens respiratory and circulatory systems
- Helps get oxygen to tissue cells
- Keeps muscles toned and joints flexible
- Releases energy, relieves boredom, and keeps mind active
- Aids in digestion

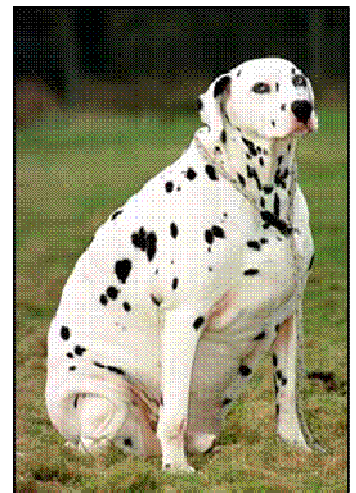
2. FEED THE CORRECT TYPE AND AMOUNT OF FOOD

Dogs need different types and amounts of food during their life stages. Younger dogs need more energy, protein, and minerals than older dogs. Active working dogs, and dogs who are outside in cooler weather would also have greater energy needs. Pregnant or nursing bitches require increased protein, minerals, and energy. 'Couch potato' dogs, such as my Murphy, however, have much lower energy needs. Older dogs, even if they remain active, may require fewer calories than when they were younger.

As I have already mentioned, some dogs can regulate their food intake well, while others will eat anything in sight. In general, it is best to feed the food as 'meals' rather than having a food bowl left out, filled up with food when it is empty and available at all times. By having a 'meal time' it is easier to monitor intake and food will not go stale. In a multiple pet household, providing food as meals also helps to ensure the pet is eating the food appropriate for him.

3. REGULARLY MONITOR YOUR DOGS' WEIGHT.

It is easy for us to put on a couple of kilos and not notice it until we try wearing that dress that we haven't worn for a while. It is even harder to notice small weight gains in dogs. By routinely weighing your dog (at the same time of day, on the same scale), you will be able to notice a slight weight increase (or decrease) before it becomes a serious problem.



If you suspect your dog is overweight, visit your vet to find out if there is a medical reason for the weight gain, before putting Fluffy on a diet. Your vet will also be able to recommend different diets and how fast your dog should shed the excess kilos etc.

Regardless of the cause of the obesity, you, the owner, are ultimately responsible for regulating Fluffy's intake and use of calories and in seeking veterinary help in maintaining your dog at an optimal weight.