



Although most pet dogs are now fed entirely on tinned or packaged food, their nutritional requirements are exactly the same as their ancestors' centuries ago. So to stay healthy, a domestic dog must receive a balanced diet containing all the nutrients that would be found in its natural diet. Dogs are adapted to eating a wide variety of food and can survive happily on an almost vegetarian diet which would make a cat very ill.

What makes up a balanced diet?

Your dog needs a balance of nutrients in his diet. The main parts of the diet will be protein (meat) and carbohydrates (dog biscuit). Protein is used to build the body tissues and carbohydrates provide energy. Animal fat is important both as an energy source and because it contains essential vitamins like vitamin A. Fat also gives flavour and texture to the food. There are many other essential ingredients of the diet such as vitamins and minerals. Most of these ingredients are either naturally present in, or added to, commercially prepared dog foods. In the wild, a dog would have a varied diet and be eating the whole animal (not just the meat) so a diet of lean steak will not give your dog everything he needs.

What is the best diet for my dog?

There are a wide range of commercially prepared foods to suit your dog's needs. However, if you see an unfamiliar brand in the shops, be cautious, especially if it is one of the cheaper foods. As in all things quality comes at a price, and a cheaper brand will often contain inferior ingredients. The well known brands are usually formulated to give your dog everything it needs. Your vet or veterinary nurse will be able to give you impartial and well-informed advice on feeding your pet.

How much should I feed my dog?

Dogs come in many shapes and sizes and have very different feeding requirements. Obviously smaller dogs tend to eat less than bigger ones and dogs which take a lot of exercise will need more food than 'couch potatoes'. Some dogs do not have good appetites and other breeds, such as the Labrador, are notoriously greedy. Every dog is an individual and any feeding recommendations are only a guide. Your dog may even need different kinds of food at different stage of its life. There are several stages during a dog's life when its food needs are greatly different from normal. These include:

- Pregnancy
- Growing dogs
- Old age

When do dogs need special diets?

- **Pregnancy** - A pregnant bitch (mother dog) needs to eat more food to support her unborn puppies. During the final stages of pregnancy a bitch may need to eat twice as much food as normal. However, the pressure of the growing puppies in her belly may stop her eating large meals. You may need to feed her more frequently or get a high-energy diet for pregnant bitches (your vet will be able to advise you on this). When your bitch is producing milk for her puppies (lactation) her appetite may increase even further.
- **Puppyhood** - During their first few months puppies grow exceptionally fast. This puts a big strain on the bitch and the puppies should be weaned on to solid food as soon as possible. Try giving some solid food at three weeks and gradually giving more until they eat only solid food at about eight weeks old. The first food should be soft and easily digestible so dry food should be soaked in water or milk. A puppy's stomach is small so it cannot eat large volumes in one go. A puppy should be fed about five times a day at eight weeks and the frequency of meals can be gradually reduced to two a day when it reaches six months old. Your vet may recommend putting your puppy on a specially formulated high-energy diet to make sure that it gets a properly balanced diet for growth.
- **Old age** - Older dogs often becomes less active and may use up less energy - be careful about reducing its food intake too much. Older dogs are not as good at digesting their food so they may need to eat more food to get all the nutrients they need. There are conveniently prepared special diets available for the older dog which can be obtained from your vet.

Is obesity a problem in dogs?

Feeding your dog



If large quantities of tasty food are always available many dogs will overeat and particularly older, neutered dogs that spend most of their time indoors are most susceptible to putting on too much weight. Weigh your dog regularly to make sure he is not gaining or losing weight and adjust the amount you feed him if necessary. If your dog needs to lose weight your vet will be able to recommend a special low calorie diet.

Feeding time is often the highlight of a dog's day and so a good balanced diet is the key to a happy healthy pet.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your dog please contact Orwell Veterinary Group on 01473 333677 and we will be happy to advise you.