

Determining and Maintaining Your Dog's Ideal Weight

By Diane Streck

You may recall one of the LEARN Tips in the last issue of *The Retriever*: dogs live an average of 2.8 years longer when kept at their “ideal” weight. In addition, dogs kept at their ideal weight have a lower incidence of cancer, arthritis and diabetes. How can you tell if your dog is at their ideal weight, and how do you keep them there?

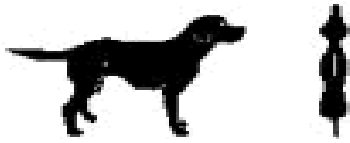


The **ideal weight** varies with each individual dog. However, you can tell if your dog is at his/her ideal weight by looking at them and lightly feeling their rib cage area. You should be able to feel your dog's ribs with a light touch but not see your dog's ribs. You should also be able to see a slight waistline when viewing your dog from above and a tucked abdomen when viewing from the side.



Most dogs are **overweight**; they have no waistline, rather their abdomen is slightly rounded; you cannot feel their ribs with a light touch; and sometimes their flanks jiggle when they walk. To help overweight dogs get to their ideal weight, slightly reduce the number of calories they consume. You can accomplish this in 3 ways: 1) reduce the amount of food; 2) switch to a lite food; and/or 3) reduce the number or size of treats. (Treats have calories, too!) Combine calorie reduction with a slight increase in activity. Just like with humans, strict dieting alone just encourages the dog's body to conserve energy and become more efficient at resisting weight loss. So be sure to include an increase in activity in any weight loss program.

Severely overweight dogs need gradual reductions (at 2 – 3 week intervals) in calories and gradual increases in exercise to give their bodies time to adjust. You can substitute $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{3}$ C of cooked oatmeal or canned unseasoned pumpkin for an equal portion of food. The oatmeal and pumpkin helps a dog feel full in spite of eating fewer calories. No crash diets or exercise programs. Studies have shown that dogs needing to lose weight do best when they lose just over 1% of their body weight/week.



A few dogs are **underweight**. Given a Lab's propensity to eat, this may seem difficult to believe. Nevertheless, LEARN has rescued several underweight Labs. An underweight dog's ribs are highly visible; there is a very obvious waist when viewed from above; and often their pelvic bones are prominent. To help an underweight dog get to their ideal weight, increase their food slightly. Severely underweight dogs need gradual increases in food to allow their stomach to expand. Note: it may take months to notice any weight gain.

Once your dog is at their ideal weight, how do you maintain it? Forget about the recommended quantity on the dog food package. It's usually overstated and doesn't take into account your individual dog's lifestyle and metabolism. The amount of food your dog needs to maintain their "ideal" weight varies with the amount of exercise they receive, the kind of food they eat (some foods are more calorific than others), the outside temperature and their metabolism. It is better for your dog to be a little too thin than too heavy. Actually measuring, rather than eyeballing, the amount of food you feed your dog can help with weight control. If you switch foods, keep the calories consistent, not the quantity.

Keep an eye on your dog's waistline, feel his/her ribs and adjust caloric intake accordingly. If they're getting too thin, feed slightly more; if they're getting heavy, feed slightly less and slightly increase their exercise. These slight adjustments can help your dog maintain his/her ideal weight. Remember, dogs live an average of 2.8 years longer if kept at their "ideal" weight.