

# Ignore This Go-To Rule if You Want a Bouncy, Playful Pet

You buy this for your pet and then follow the directions, right? Well, stop doing that today if you want a healthy, happy, bouncy, and playful pet. Otherwise you'll be creating the exact opposite in your pet — a disabled, diseased, uncomfortable, and unhappy pet.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many dogs today are overfed, and part of the problem is the feeding guidelines provided on commercial pet food packages
- Another problem is that fat pets have become the “new normal,” so many people don’t realize their dog is too heavy to be healthy
- It’s easy to calculate the amount of calories your dog should consume each day to either regain or maintain an ideal weight
- Once you know the right amount of calories to feed, it becomes about portion control and making adjustments as necessary
- A good guideline for how much drinking water your dog needs each day is between one-half and 1 ounce of water per pound of body weight

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It’s very important to know how much food to feed your dog, especially since we know that over half the dogs in the U.S. are overweight or obese. Clearly, many dogs are being overfed throughout their lives.

Too many calories, coupled with low-quality, biologically inappropriate diets and lack of exercise are the reasons behind not only the current epidemic of fat pets, but also the rapidly rising rates of degenerative diseases in companion animals.

## It’s Probably Best to Ignore Pet Food Package Feeding Guidelines

Most dog parents who feed commercially available pet food follow the suggested feeding guidelines printed on the package, which often isn’t the best approach.

These recommendations typically use overly broad weight ranges for dogs such as “under 20 pounds” (a 15-pound dog requires significantly more calories than a 5-pound dog), “20 to 50 pounds” and “over 50 pounds” (some breeds tip the scales at well over 100 pounds and may need twice the calories a 50-pound dog requires).

Package feeding instructions also use wide serving ranges, such as “feed one-half to 1 1/2 cups.” These suggestions obviously can’t take into account, for example, a dog’s activity level, and they tend to be short on other important details, such as whether “feed one-half to 1 1/2 cups” is a daily or per-meal guideline.

## Many Pet Parents Have Become ‘Fat Blind’

In order to know how much food your dog should eat each day, you first have to determine her ideal weight. Unfortunately, these days many pet parents don’t realize their dog is overweight because being overweight has become the "new normal." Many people can no longer tell the difference between a fat pet and a normal-sized pet.

If you’re not sure about your own dog, look down at her from above. You should be able to see a tapered-in waist. If she's oval-shaped, she's probably too heavy. You should also be able to feel (but not see) her ribs as well as the bones near the base of her tail. If she's obese, you'll see noticeable amounts of excess fat on her abdomen, hips and neck. Also compare your pet to this body condition chart provided by the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA):



Dogs Body Condition Score Chart

The goal is a body condition score of 5. If you’re still not sure whether your dog is overweight, consult with your veterinarian.

# How to Calculate Your Dog’s Daily Calorie Requirements

Once you’ve settled on an ideal weight for your dog, you can use the following general formula to calculate how many calories he requires each day:

$$\text{Daily calories} = \text{Body weight (kg)} \times 30 + 70$$

First, convert your dog’s weight from pounds to kilograms. One kilogram = 2.2 pounds, so divide his ideal weight in pounds by 2.2. For example, if he’s 20 pounds with a body condition score of 5 (meaning he’s not overweight), divide 20 by 2.2. Your dog's ideal weight in kilograms is 9.1. Now the formula looks like this:

$$\text{Daily calories} = 9.1 \text{ (kg)} \times 30 + 70$$

And finally, it looks like this:

$$\text{Daily calories} = 343$$

If your dog eats 343 calories a day he’ll maintain his current ideal weight of 20 pounds as long as his daily activity level remains the same. If he starts getting more aerobic exercise each day (which benefits almost any dog, by the way), you may need to increase his calorie intake a bit.

But if for some reason your dog is suddenly not getting the workout he’s accustomed to, it may be a good idea to reduce his daily calories a bit until he’s back to exercising at his former level. If you’re calculating daily calories for an overweight dog, you need to use his ideal weight (not his current weight) in the above formula to arrive at the right number of calories to feed for weight loss and maintenance at the new, ideal weight.

It’s important to routinely monitor your dog’s body for signs of weight gain, and weigh him regularly as well, either at home or at a veterinary clinic if he’s too large to weigh on a bathroom scale. If his weight starts to creep up, adjust those daily calories down.

If your dog drops below his ideal weight due to increased physical activity, you may need to increase his daily calorie intake as well. The above formula does not take into account dogs burning lots of calories if they are working hard for many hours a day (because most dogs simply aren’t).

Needless to say, if your dog loses weight for no apparent reason, it’s important to make an appointment with your veterinarian for a wellness checkup.

## It’s All About Portion Control

Once you know exactly how many calories to feed your dog each day, measure her food using an actual measuring cup and practice portion control — typically a morning and evening meal. A great alternative is to offer some of her daily calories in food puzzles or a snuffle mat to make mealtime mentally stimulating.

A high-protein, low-carb, nutritionally balanced, fresh food diet with the right amount of calories, controlled through the portions you feed, and adjusted up or down according to her exercise level and body condition, will help your dog reach and/or remain at an ideal weight.

It's also important to drastically limit treats (be sure to include any treats you feed in the total daily calorie count). Set aside a small portion of food that can be rolled into tiny pea-sized bites and used as treats throughout the day. Other options are a few raw pumpkin or sunflower seeds, berries and frozen peas, and also homemade treats.

Small amounts of other fruits (melons and **blueberries**, for example) as well as tiny cubes of low-fat cheese also make good treats. Just be sure to feed quantities that are no more than a one eighth-inch square and all treats for the day fit into a tablespoon for every 30 pounds of dog.

## How Much Water Does My Dog Need to Drink Each Day?

Obviously, dogs cannot live by food alone! The amount of drinking water your dog needs each day depends on his size, diet, age, activity level and weather conditions.

- A good general guideline is that a healthy dog should drink between one-half and 1 ounce of water per pound of body weight each day. So a healthy 65-pound Labrador Retriever should be drinking between about 33 and 65 ounces, or about one-fourth to one-half gallon of water daily.
- If your dog is eating a moisture-rich, species-appropriate diet, she's getting some of her water needs met with each meal, so she may not drink as much from her water bowl. But if she's eating primarily dry dog food (which is not recommended), she may actually need more than the average daily intake to compensate for the lack of moisture in her diet.
- After a period of hard play or exercise, use caution when your dog rehydrates. If he immediately laps up the contents of his water bowl, rest him for a bit before you refill his bowl. If your dog is very active, it's a good idea to have water with you when he exercises so that you can give him frequent short water breaks to keep him hydrated.
- During the warmer months of the year, especially during summer, it's important to monitor your dog's water intake to ensure she's adequately hydrated.

To determine if your dog may need more water, lift some skin at the back of her neck and let it go. If your dog is well-hydrated, the skin will fall quickly back into place. The skin of a dehydrated dog will fall more slowly and form sort of a tent. Another method is to check your dog's gums. Moist, slick gums indicate a good level of hydration; dry or sticky gums mean your pet's body needs more water.

### Sources and References

[PetMD](#)

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