

The importance of feeding a balanced diet

Bruce Waddell, a partner at Willows Veterinary Group, reminds us of the necessity to satisfy the needs of companion care animals by feeding the right diet at the right time

As humans, we are all aware of the need to eat a balanced diet to avoid problems in later life. We have this knowledge and are able to choose to act on it or ignore it. The pets we care for do not have this choice. They rely on us to provide them with the correct diet to fit in with their breed characteristics, age, weight, neutered state and lifestyle.

As owners this can be bewildering; we are subject to clever marketing, fancy packaging and conflicting messages.

Remember – dogs don't need taste or flavour – they need the correct nutrition.

Compared to humans, dogs have relatively sensitive digestive systems and cannot be fed like man. In order to remain fit and healthy throughout their many years, your dog's diet must satisfy all their needs, avoiding both deficiencies and excesses.

SIZE AND BREED

The canine species is one of the few in which there is a great range in weight and size. From a Chihuahua to a Great Dane, there are over

400 breeds which have different physiological, metabolic and behavioural differences. One key physiological difference relates to energy requirements. As the dog's weight increases, its energy requirement per kilogram of body weight decreases. This means that small-breed dogs should receive a diet with a higher energy concentration than medium-breed dogs.

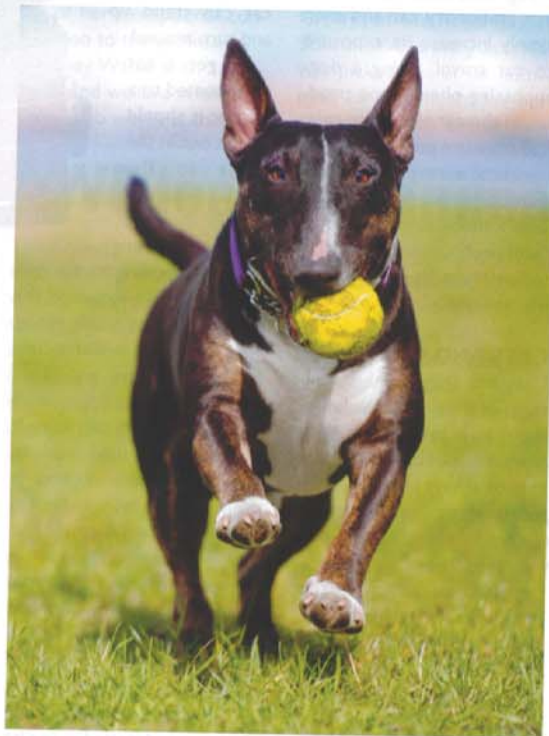
In large-breed dogs it is necessary to increase the food energy-density so that the volume of food fed can be restricted. An increase in concentration of energy is mirrored in protein, mineral and vitamin levels.

To encourage tooth-cleaning chewing behaviour, dry kibbles are recommended.

LIFESTYLE CHALLENGES

A working dog will have different nutritional requirements to a dog living in a strictly urban environment. Even then, each dog is an individual – some love running around and some just like sitting in front of the fire.

Small-breed dogs with exclusively urban and essen-



tially 'indoor' lifestyles should be identified as high-risk when it comes to weight-gain. These dogs have less of an opportunity to expend energy and, coupled with an owner who rewards (or 'treats') their pet by means of feeding in excess of needs, a nutritional imbalance is easily established. A food suited to indoor 'mini' breeds provides the exact requirements when fed according to recommendations.

Pregnancy has a dramatic effect on the mother's nutritional needs. A bitch expecting puppies requires more protein, energy and minerals starting as early as the sixth week of gestation. Lactation leads to an even greater demand on intakes due to

the exceptional quantities of nutrient-rich milk required to feed a litter of puppies. A 25kg bitch with six pups, for example, will reach a peak milk production of two litres/day three weeks after giving birth. Only a specific diet will allow her to meet all her needs.

Post-neutering, dogs are at risk of gaining excess weight if the same feeding regime as pre-neutering is continued. There are specific post-neutered diets available which satisfy the appetite of the dog, deliver all the nutrients needed but are low in calories.

AGE CONCERN

In terms of age grouping, a dog passes from puppy to

adult to senior. As they start to mature there are diets specially formulated to help the retention of youthful vitality and helps assist the body fight against the effects of cell ageing.

At 75-80% of their total life expectancy, dogs are considered 'senior'. At this point owners should again consider changing the diet to help them with age-related conditions. Vitamins E and C, taurine, lutein and beta-carotenes, for example, support the natural immune defences of the aged dog when included in the diet. Essential fatty acids in fish and borage oils contribute to preservation of skin and coat health also.

FOOD FORTHOUGHT

Not all aged dogs are the same in their nutritional needs. This article has only scratched the surface of canine nutrition, and already it has posed some serious questions about how an owner can ensure that their dog's nutritional needs are met throughout their life. It is clear that off the shelf dog food found in many supermarkets cannot possibly satisfy the needs of all dogs at all stages of their life.

For more information contact the Willows Veterinary Group in Hartford, Northwich, Cheshire CW8 1LP. Tel: 01606 723 204.

TIPS FOR SQPS

- 1 Ensure that the food you are recommending is appropriate for the age and size of the dog.
- 2 Discuss the dog's lifestyle with the owner. Just because a dog is a working dog breed doesn't necessarily mean that it has the lifestyle of a working dog.
- 3 Ask the owners to give a description of the body (body condition scoring) and bear in mind that most dogs will tend towards being overweight rather than underweight.
- 4 When recommending daily feed amounts make sure that the owner knows to factor in any treats that are given in addition to the regular feed.



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