

WEIGHT CONTROL

Potomac Valley News

By Chris Zink DVM PhD. DACVP ©2006

Ah, summer. A time when we all exercise more and spend at least some time sitting out on the deck, eating salads and fruit juice. The result? We take off some of those pounds that crept on over the winter, and as a result are more healthy and feel better about ourselves (even if we are not totally pleased with what the result looks like in a bathing suit). That's one of the advantages of being a human. We get to decide how much we feed ourselves.

But our dogs are not so lucky. We decide how much food we put in their bowls. And, just like we do to ourselves, more often than not, we are putting in too much! I have assessed the weight on hundreds of dogs of a variety of breeds over the past year at seminars all over the country and a conservative estimate is that about 50% of the dogs that I see are overweight; approximately 25% are actually obese. These are not couch potato dogs, these are dogs who's owners expect them to jump in obedience, to run over rough ground in retrieving tests and to perform in agility. And we are seeing the sad results: ruptured anterior cruciate ligaments (often both legs), severe degenerative arthritis in dogs in their prime, degenerative disk disease, and many more conditions that are caused by or exacerbated by excess weight.

Why are so many working dogs overweight? The following are some answers to this difficult question:

1. Keeping a dog at working weight is incompatible with showing in conformation. I have never understood why dogs whose breed standard says that they should be shown in "hard working condition" don't win in the conformation ring unless they are FAT. If someone knows the answer to this question, I would very much like to hear it. In the meantime, assume that if your Golden is winning in the conformation ring, it is probably about 8 to 15 lb. overweight. When you are done with breed showing, take the weight off the dog, for its own good.

2. People are still feeding their dog the same amount of food that it got as an adolescent. This is a common mistake. But just like most of us who eat less now than we did as teenagers, your dog needs less too. Also like us, a dog's metabolism slows down with age and the dog gradually needs less food to maintain its weight.

3. People believe the suggested feeding regimens that are printed on the dog food bag. What can I say about this except that even the most active dog doesn't need as much food as most of the dog food companies recommend. The best way to determine how much food a dog needs is to feed it the amount that keeps its weight constant. This is determined by trial and error.

4. The dog has been less active, but they are feeding the same amount of food. Adjust the dog's intake to its activity level. Remember that in the winter it may not get as much exercise and decrease its intake accordingly. Every time you go to the dog food bag, think about how much exercise the dog has had and dole out the food accordingly.

5. People don't know how to determine what is a correct weight for their dog. Dogs vary in their height, bone structure and muscularity, so there is no one "correct weight" for a Golden Retriever. The best way to determine whether a dog is overweight is to test the skin over the ribs. To check the ribs, you stand with the dog beside you with you facing its butt. You place your thumb on the middle of the spine half way down the back and spread your fingers out over the ribs. Then run your fingers up and down along the skin. You should be able to feel the bumps of the ribs (WITHOUT PRESSING IN).

6. People worry that their dogs will not get enough nutrition if they feed their dogs less. Premium dog foods have a ton of nutrition packed into them. If your dog is overweight, then unless it has a hormonal problem (e.g., hypothyroidism), it is getting too much nutrition, and cutting back will not put the dog in jeopardy. Remember: just like humans, individual dogs vary in their metabolic rate and some dogs just need less food.

7. People don't know how to get their dogs to lose weight without all the side effects - begging, that sad-eyed look that says "I'm hungry", etc. Try the pumpkin diet. It works great, is healthy, and dogs are not hungry when on it. Basically, reduce your dog's regular food by 25% and replace it with a 50% volume of canned pumpkin (not the kind with sugar and spices, ready-made for pies). For example, if you are feeding your dog 2 cups of food, you would instead feed it 1 1/2 cups of food and a whole cup of canned pumpkin. Dogs love it (it has the texture of canned dog food), it provides vitamins and roughage, it makes the dog feel full (so they don't forage in the yard for leftovers), and they lose weight!

8. The vet said that the dog was a good weight (or even underweight). I have asked many vets why they don't tell their clients that their dogs are overweight, and I always get the same answer: "I have lost so many clients who were offended that I told them their dogs were overweight, that I just don't tell them anymore". So please, don't be offended - it doesn't reflect on you personally, honest.

Let me close with one, non-Golden, example. Julie Daniels was showing her female Rottweiler Jessy in conformation. After it got its first major (5 points), she decided that she would rather do agility with the dog. Now Rottweilers, like Golden Retrievers, are not ideally structured for agility. So she took 21 lb (yes 21 lb. - this is not a typo) off the dog. The dog looked lovely, and in the process it lost 1 1/2" in height at the withers (for a Golden this could mean the difference between having to jump 30" and 24" in agility). Jessy is the all-time top winning Rottweiler in agility (National Finalist 5 years in a row) and is still healthy and injury-free at the age of 10 (and still competing in veterans).

So why not do this for your best friend?