

# Getting your dog into shape



# Introduction

Just like people, pets need to eat the right diet and get enough exercise to stay fit and healthy. But as many of us know, it's not always easy!

In this handy guide, you'll find lots of information on feeding and exercise to help you keep your dog healthy and happy. And if your dog is carrying a few extra pounds, there's also advice on how you can help them lose weight and get back into shape.



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From the *PAW Report*  
Important facts from our latest  
*PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report*



# How do I know if my dog is a healthy shape?

## Why are we talking about shape?

A dog's shape is a better way to tell if they're carrying extra weight rather than relying on the scales alone. That's because the ideal weight is different for every type and breed – but a healthy shape is the same for all dogs.

It's good to get into the habit of checking your dog's shape every few weeks, starting when they're a puppy. That way, you'll know what's normal for your dog – and they'll enjoy the extra attention!

## How to check for a healthy shape

All you have to do is 'look and feel'. We've included some pictures to help you.

When you've finished, give your dog a big hug – and please remember to wash your hands!

### Look

Look at your dog from the side, and from above. You should be able to see a waist; if not, your dog may be a bit overweight.

### Feel

Run your hands over your dog's side. The skin should move freely over the ribs, which ought to be easy to feel.

## Why is your dog's shape important?

- A dog with a healthy shape is more likely to enjoy a long and happy life.
- Overweight dogs get old before their time, and you'll have less fun with them.
- Being overweight can lead to other problems, including arthritis, diabetes and heart disease.
- Operations are more risky for dogs that are overweight.

### Feel

Gently squeeze the base of your dog's tail where it joins the spine. There shouldn't be any build-up of fat.

### Feel

Run your hands along your dog's back. You should be able to feel the spine and hipbones quite easily under the skin, but they shouldn't be sticking out.

### Feel

Feel under your dog's tummy. It should go in, not bulge out.

Your vet or vet nurse can show you how to check your dog's shape.

## BODY CONDITION SCORE

THE FIVE WELFARE NEEDS



1

### VERY THIN

- Very little muscle
- Easily seen ribs, backbone and hipbones
- No body fat

2

### UNDERWEIGHT

- Clearly seen ribs and backbone
- A little fat over hipbones
- Obviously tucked-in waist

3

### IDEAL

- Can feel ribs, backbone and hipbones, but not prominent
- Smooth, curved, tucked-in waist
- Base of tail smooth

4

### OVERWEIGHT

- No waist and back broader
- Ribs, backbone and hipbones difficult to feel
- Fat at base of tail

5

### OBESE

- Bulging pot belly
- Cannot feel ribs, backbone or hipbones
- Thick fatty pads at base of tail





# Diet

Dogs come in many shapes and sizes. The type and amount of food they need depends on their breed, species, age, health and lifestyle. For example, a working sheepdog needs much more energy than a small dog that spends most of the day indoors. Your dog needs fresh water to drink at all times.

## What should I feed my dog?

‘Life-stage feeding’ matches your dog’s diet to what is needed at different ages and stages of development. For example, puppies need different food from older dogs, because their bodies are still growing. Many companies make food especially for puppies, juniors, adults and seniors.

Feeding your dog a complete commercial pet food is the easiest way to make sure they get all the nutrients they need.

- You’ll find guidelines on how much to feed on the packet.
- You can check you’re feeding the right amount by weighing the food out.

It sounds obvious, but pets that eat too much get fat! If you feed your dog a lot of treats as well as their normal food, most of the extra calories will turn into fat. Dogs don’t need treats to know you love them: playing and spending time with you are what they enjoy most of all.

## How often should I feed my dog?

Dogs like routine. They’re happiest when they have regular mealtimes – it also helps you make sure they’re getting the right amount of food, and that they’re eating it all.

Our vets recommend that you split your dog’s daily food into two equal-sized meals. This is because:

- A shorter time between feeds (12 hours, not 24) means the dog will be less hungry, and less likely to gobble the food too quickly.
- A second meal gives the dog something to look forward to, so the day is less boring.
- Dogs often sleep after a meal – ideal if you need to leave them at home.
- Dogs on two meals a day usually get fewer treats and titbits.
- Two small meals are easier for dogs to digest than one large meal.
- For some small dogs, feeding more often – up to four times a day – can help prevent problems like low blood sugar.
- Remember that each meal is half your dog’s daily food: feeding twice a day doesn’t mean giving twice the amount!

## Can I feed my dog bones?

Our vets recommend that you don’t feed bones to your dog. Bones can get stuck in your dog’s throat, and splinters can damage the stomach and intestines.

## What about food scraps?

Our vets advise owners not to feed leftovers, bits of meat and other scraps, because:

- Human food isn’t always good for dogs: some, like chocolate and grapes, is poisonous.
- Dogs that get scraps may refuse to eat their normal food without them.
- It unbalances the dog’s regular diet, and they often get overweight.
- Your dog may misbehave during your mealtimes, thinking they’re going to get food, too!
- Too many vegetables can cause wind. Not a problem for your dog, but it could be for you!
- Fatty foods can cause tummy upsets, and contain lots of extra calories. To a medium-sized dog, eating a cube of cheese is like a person eating two scones – and a Christmas dinner would be the equivalent of 3,000 calories!



# What it means if your dog is overweight ...

For dogs, being overweight can cause a whole host of health problems. These can include heart, liver and joint problems, breathing difficulties and diabetes; obese dogs also find it harder to exercise, and cope with hot weather.

Dogs put on weight simply by eating more food than they need. Luckily, in most cases, the answer is simple, too: it just takes time, and a bit of effort, to get them back into shape.

## ... and what you can do to help

Start by going to see your vet. They’ll be able to tell if there’s some other reason your dog is putting on weight (an underactive thyroid gland, for example). Many practices run a diet club for pets, which might also be useful.

You’ll also need to weigh your dog, so you have a ‘starting point’ for their weight loss programme. This is easy with small dogs: first, weigh yourself, then pick up the dog and weigh yourself again. The difference between the two is the weight of the dog. If you can’t lift your dog safely, your local vets will have a set of scales you can use.



**As well as diet, exercise is very important in helping your dog to lose weight.**

**Your vet can advise on the kinds of exercise, and how much your dog needs.**



It’s best for your dog to lose weight gradually: about 1–2% of their starting weight each week is a good target. If your dog is just slightly overweight, feeding a bit less, or changing to a lower-calorie food, may be all you need to do. Dogs that are very fat or obese may need a special diet, as reducing their food too much may mean they don’t get all the nutrients they need. Your vet can advise you about this.

Another top tip is to keep a food diary for a week, and take it with you when you go to see your vet. This can help you spot where your dog is getting the extra calories, and makes it easier to cut them out without a special diet.

# YOUR DOG'S FOOD DIARY

[illegible]

Helping your dog to lose weight may take time and effort, but it's worth it. Stick with the plan, and your dog can look forward to a longer, healthier and happier life.

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# Exercise

Our dogs rely on us to give them the exercise they need to keep them fit and healthy. The best form of exercise for most dogs is walking – which is really good for people, too!

All dogs need regular exercise, but especially when they're trying to lose weight, because walks and games help burn calories. How much exercise your dog needs depends on their type, age and health. For puppies, older dogs, or those with arthritis, for example, several short walks a day are usually better than one long one.

It's important not to make big or sudden changes to your dog's diet or exercise routine. If you have any questions or concerns, your vet will be happy to help.

## How to make an exercise plan for an overweight dog

- How much exercise your dog needs depend on its breed, age, initial fitness level and personality.
  - Young dogs can usually go further and faster than older ones
  - Dogs with short legs don't need to walk as far as those with long legs
  - Jogging isn't good for puppies or larger breeds, as it can damage their joints
  - Dogs with short noses, like Bulldogs and Boxers, may have trouble breathing if they work too hard.
- Several short walks are better than one long one. We recommend you split the sessions we've suggested here into separate walks: they don't have to be done all in one go.



- Work at your dog's own pace. If your dog isn't getting tired, or is still full of energy when you get home, more exercise might be needed ...
- ... but be careful not to overdo it. If your dog is struggling, gets home worn out, or refuses to go at all, you may need to cut back!
- Give your dog a five-minute warm-up at the beginning of the exercise, and a five-minute cool-down afterwards. This will help prevent muscle and joint strains and other injuries.
- Make sure your dog will sit and stay on command, and walk to heel on the lead. This will make the exercises easier to do, and more effective.
- Allow your dog to have a good sniff around before you start the exercises. This is really important for their mental health.
- As long as you're both dressed for it, most dogs are happy to go out whatever the weather. Rain and even snow aren't usually a problem (for the dog, anyway!). In really hot weather, go out early in the morning, or later on in the evening, if you can so your dog doesn't get overheated.
- If you don't have somewhere you can exercise your dog safely, you can play the games we've suggested indoors (if you have enough space!).
- Your dog needs to stick to the programme, so it has to be a daily routine, not just something you do at weekends. This is especially important for older and overweight dogs. If you can't walk them yourself for some reason, ask a friend, or maybe a professional dog walker, so your dog doesn't miss out on a session.
- Always check with your vet that the exercise programme you've planned is suitable for your dog.
- It isn't good for dogs to exercise with a full stomach, so wait an hour after feeding before going for a walk. It's also not good for them to eat straight afterwards. Make sure your dog has water available, but don't let them drink too much in one go.
- Build up the amount of exercise gradually. Trying to rush things may do more harm than good.
- Do different things as part of the programme. You and your dog are much more likely to stick with it if it's interesting and varied.

# YOUR DOG'S EXERCISE PROGRAMME

### A couple of things about the programme ...

All dogs are different. This example is designed for a dog that needs about an hour's exercise each day. Your vet will be able to help you adjust it to suit your dog's own needs.

'Varied walking' is where you speed-walk for about 30 seconds, walk at normal pace for about a minute, then speed up again, and so on. This is a really good exercise you can do randomly throughout your walk.



WEEK ONE 15 MINS	WEEK TWO 25 MINS	
Warm up	Warm up	
5 minutes of gentle walking on the lead	10 minutes of gentle walking	
5 minutes of games – fetch or flat rubber disc throwing	5 minutes of games	
5 minutes of gentle walking on the lead	10 minutes of gentle walking	
Cool down	Cool down	
WEEK THREE 35 MINS	WEEK FOUR 45 MINS	WEEK FIVE 30 MINS
Warm up	Warm up	Warm up
10 minutes of gentle walking	5 minutes of games	5 minutes of games
5 minutes of games	10 minutes of gentle walking	5 minutes of varied walking
10 minutes of gentle walking	5 minutes of fetch games	5 minutes of fetch games
5 minutes of fetch games	10 minutes of gentle walking	5 minutes of gentle walking
5 minutes of gentle walking	5 minutes of football	5 minutes of football
Cool down	10 minutes of gentle walking	5 minutes of varied and vigorous walking
	Cool down	Cool down
WEEK SIX 40 MINS	WEEK SEVEN 50 MINS	WEEK EIGHT 60 MINS
Warm up	Warm up	Warm up
5 minutes of games	10 minutes of varied walking	10 minutes of varied walking
10 minutes of varied walking	5 minutes of games	5 minutes of games
5 minutes of fetch games	10 minutes of varied walking	10 minutes of varied walking
5 minutes of varied walking	5 minutes of fetch games	10 minutes of fetch games
5 minutes of football	5 minutes of varied walking	10 minutes of varied walking
10 minutes of varied walking	5 minutes of football	5 minutes of football
Cool down	10 minutes of varied walking	10 minutes of varied walking
	Cool down	Cool down

You will soon see a return on your efforts and in due course you will have a more active, happier, healthier dog, enjoying life to the full. And you'll probably feel fitter too!



# From the *PAW Report*

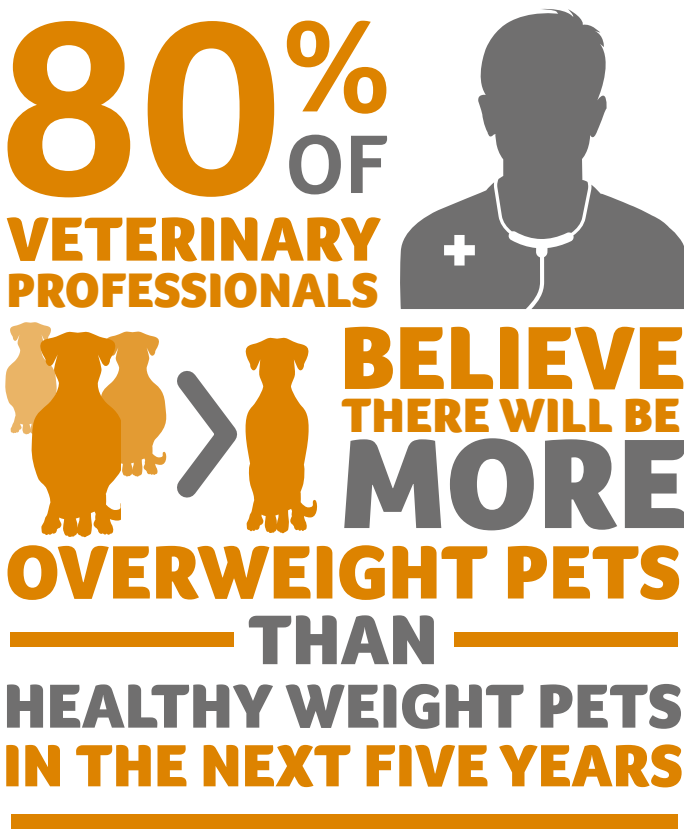
Every year, we produce our *PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report* about how healthy and happy the UK's pets really are.

## Diet

Our latest Report shows that too many people are still feeding their pets food that isn't good for them. More than 5.5 million pets are given things like crisps, cake, leftovers, cheese, chips and takeaways as part of their normal diet – and more than 2 million owners feed treats because their pets beg for them.

Not surprisingly, many vets tell us they now see many more overweight and obese pets – even though most owners know that obese pets have more health problems, and live shorter lives.

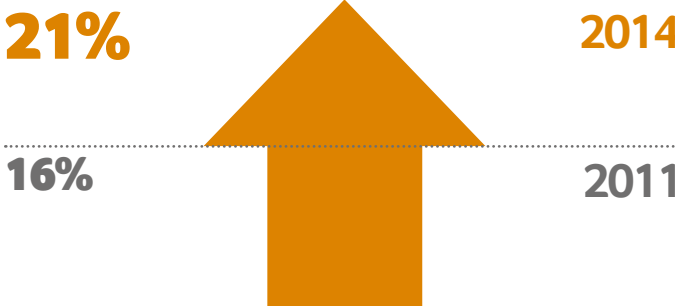
It's not all bad news, though. More owners are now feeding their dogs based on body shape and weight than they were in 2011. This is really positive, but there's still a lot to do. We can deal with the obesity crisis facing the UK's pets: it just takes time and effort from owners.



**OVER 5.5 MILLION PETS GET TREATS AS PART OF THEIR DAILY DIET INCLUDING:**



**DOG OWNERS FEEDING DOG BASED ON BODY WEIGHT OR SHAPE**

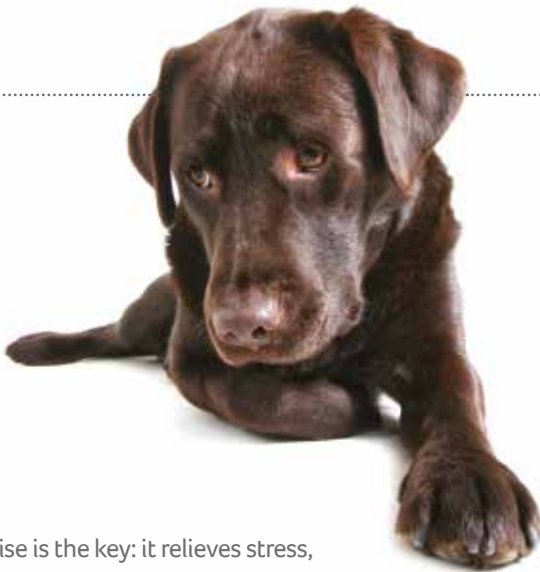


## Boredom and exercise

Bored dogs are unhappy dogs. They can show their frustration through destructive behaviour, barking a lot, toileting in the house, or developing compulsive habits like excessive licking.

Millions of dogs are left alone for long periods every day, so the problem could be even greater than anyone knows. So what can be done?

Exercise is the key: it relieves stress, and is essential to a dog's physical and mental wellbeing. Yet 2.4 million dogs in the UK don't get daily exercise off-the-lead outside their home or garden – and more than 800,000 of them never go for off-the-lead walks at all. Of those dogs that do go for walks, most are out for less than an hour a day.



**2.4 MILLION DOGS DON'T GET OFF-THE-LEAD EXERCISE ON A DAILY BASIS**



**MOST DOGS THAT DO GO FOR A WALK ARE OUT FOR LESS THAN AN HOUR**



Learn more about the health of pets in the UK today by reading our *PAW Report*: [pdsa.org.uk/PAWreport](https://pdsa.org.uk/PAWreport)



# PDSA is the UK's leading veterinary charity

In our 51 Pet Hospitals UK-wide, we have more than **300 vets** and **600 nursing staff**, who carry out **2.7 million treatments** on more than **470,000 sick and injured pets** each year.

We care for pets whose owners are in real need, and can't afford vets' fees: we also help and advise owners on everyday care for their pets.

Treating our pet patients costs us more than £60 million a year, with every penny coming from donations.

For more information on the charity and its work:

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