

Nutrition Guidelines for Rescue Dogs

By Anne Copeland & Margaret Rapp



Many of the rescue dogs we foster and adopt have been neglected, abused, and malnourished. They have to be slowly taught to eat high quality food that will help them recover and will support a healthy lifestyle.

There are some general rules about nutrition that apply to all dogs. The label on dog food provides information about ingredients. Some ingredients are

healthful; others are “filler” and provide no nutritional value. All pet owners should be able to determine how much food to provide to achieve weight gain, weight loss or to maintain a dog’s ideal weight.

What to Feed

Examine all food for the phrase “For All Life Stages” or a similar statement. This means that the food has been tested and meets the AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) standards for proper nourishment from puppyhood through adulthood and senior years. The choice of canned, dry kibble, frozen raw, homemade raw or dehydrated raw food is based on the time that can be devoted to meal preparation. The following rules of label reading apply to all of these choices. Ingredients on the label are listed in order of quantity by weight.

1. **PROTEIN:** Quality protein should be one of the first three ingredients on the ingredient list; preferably the first. Quality protein is named protein such as beef, whitefish, eggs, or chicken, not “by-products”. By-products are usually not readily digestible.
2. **CARBOHYDRATES:** Carbohydrates should include whole grains such as rye, oatmeal, and quinoa that provide fiber to the diet. The following carbohydrates should be **AVOIDED** if at all possible: wheat, corn, or soy in any form since these frequently cause allergic reactions in dogs. In addition, very little of these carbohydrates are actually digested, rather they provide bulk and are excreted. (which you eventually must pick up). Most of the high quality foods also contain fruits and vegetables in varying quantities. These provide antioxidants as well as fiber and some micronutrients.
3. **FAT:** Most foods also contain a fat source and should be stabilized or preserved with some form of tocopherols but **NOT** ethoxyquin.
4. **SUPPLEMENTS:** Vitamins and supplements are often added to the complete diet.

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These include fish oil, probiotics, Coenzyme Q-10 (Co Q-10), and glucosamine. Fish oils such as wild salmon oil, krill oil or Ultra oil are a source of Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids. Fish oils are good for the heart, the skin, and the coat. The label should indicate that the oil is mercury-free. Probiotics such as plain yogurt or kefir can be added to the diet as powdered supplements or as dairy products with active cultures. These supplements maintain bacterial balance in the gastrointestinal tract, promote better digestion, and support immune system function. Co Q-10 is a compound that helps produce ATP, a major energy source for the body and is thought to be helpful in the prevention of heart disease. Glucosamine-Chondroitin supplements can be provided for muscle and joint health. Cranberry juice capsules are good for the urinary tract and bran cereal (All Bran) helps maintain healthy anal sacs.

How Much to Feed

Almost every brand of dog food grossly overestimates the needed amount of calories. Even if the dog does not become overweight eating that much food, you will be wasting your money, as the excess food will pass through the GI tract and will result in larger and often softer feces to clean up.

How much to feed depends on the condition of the dog. If it is severely underweight, feed more initially until the dog approaches its ideal weight. If it is overweight, feed about 30% less than the quantity needed to maintain ideal weight. The formulae below illustrate how to calculate caloric intake to maintain or lose weight.



Calculation to Maintain Weight

The number of calories your dog needs each day is the sum of 30 multiplied by weight in kilograms (pounds/2.2) plus 70.

Example:

$$\frac{22 \text{ lb dog}}{2.2} \times 30 + 70 = 370 \text{ calories per day to maintain weight}$$

Calculation to Lose Weight

Dogs should not be deprived of food to lose weight. This is dangerous and abusive to the animal. A safe weight loss formula provides 70% of the calculated maintenance calories until ideal body weight is achieved.

Example:

$$\frac{22 \text{ lb dog}}{2.2} \times 30 + 70 = 370 \text{ calories per day} \times 70\% = 259 \text{ calories to lose weight}$$

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Most quality dog foods list the number of calories per cup on the package. If not, contact the manufacturer to find out the calorie count of the food you are using.

Remember that treats and supplements (fish oil, yogurt, or kefir) count toward the daily calorie total. A few pieces of kibble can be saved from a meal to use as treats. Other low calorie foods are baby carrots or small pieces of cauliflower. A great idea for training class rewards is to put Cheerios in a plastic bag with a smelly bacon-flavored treat. After a few days, the Cheerios will smell bacony and are a yummy and low calorie snack at 3 calories each.

When & How to Feed

Many of us were taught that our dogs only need to be fed once a day. However, for most dogs, mealtime is the highlight of their day and it probably is better for digestion if the daily amount of food is divided into two meals instead of one. People who give two meals generally provide one early in the morning and another in late afternoon or early evening. Free feeding (leaving food out all the time) is strongly discouraged. This practice can result in “picky” eaters and it is difficult to determine whether the dog is getting the proper amount of nutrition, especially in a multiple-dog household. In addition, the food can spoil and cause illness. Leaving food out can lead to obesity, especially in a food-oriented breed like the Cavalier.

Meals should be offered at the planned time of day, preferably in a non-plastic dish. Plastic tends to scratch and harbor bacteria, as well as leach chemicals which have been found to bleach the color from the dog’s nose. Ceramic bowls can also chip and harbor bacteria in the chipped areas. The best bowls for long term use are stainless steel.



Some foster dogs have never eaten from a dish and are reluctant to put their noses into a bowl. You can try feeding these dogs off a flat plate or a paper plate. If necessary, start out by feeding them on the floor, since that is probably the way they were fed if they came from

a puppy mill.

Many foster dogs do not know what a treat is and have never taken food from anyone’s hand. Take your time with them, and, if offering a treat, either put it on the floor (watch the other animals if you already have dogs in your home) or put it on the floor of their crate. Over time you can begin to keep your hand in the area near the treat and slowly move closer until the dog gets used to the idea that food from your hand is safe.

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Don't worry if a new foster or adoptee doesn't eat for a few days, as long as he is drinking liquid. A healthy dog can go four or five days without food with no serious effect and will eat when he is hungry. Keep offering food at the planned times and if it isn't eaten in 20 minutes, remove it until the next regular feeding time. Offer NO TREATS or other goodies until the dog is eating regularly. You aren't doing the dog any favors by teaching it to hold out until you offer something "better" like hot dogs, chicken, or steak.

The benefits of good nutrition are multiple, and will be increasingly evident as time passes. The dog will have more stamina, will sleep less, and will be able to walk longer distances. The most obvious change will be the absolute metamorphosis from having a dull, dry, brittle coat to the soft, shiny mantle of feathery hair that characterizes the well-nourished Cavalier.

