



Senior Dog Nutrition



Dogs are mature when they reach half of their anticipated life expectancy and senior when they are in the last 25% of their expected lifespan. Small breed dogs tend to live longer than large and giant breeds, so large and giant breed

dogs are considered senior between 5 and 8 years of age, while small breed dogs are considered senior at 10–11 years of age. The term geriatric is used when a dog has lived beyond the average lifespan for their breed and size.

At these approximate mid-life points, it is common for dogs to gain some weight and exhibit age-related physical changes; this usually results in their nutritional requirements changing as well. Annual exams are important for all pets, but they are especially important for senior dogs, as their health and needs may change more rapidly than younger dogs. It is important to discuss your dog's physical health with the veterinarian, as well as their diet. Unfortunately, there is no single blood test that can be done to judge a dog's nutritional status, but your veterinarian can combine information from the diet history and physical exam to get a good idea of your dog's overall nutritional health. Based on their assessment, your veterinarian may recommend food with a specific nutrient profile to help support one or more of your dog's age-related conditions.

It's important to understand that there are no established nutrient requirements for senior dogs. What this means is that pet food manufacturers don't have a standardized list of minimum nutrients required for a senior dog food. Adult dogs vary broadly in when and how they begin to age, so it is difficult to organize nutrient needs into a single set of requirements.

One of the best things that we can do for our dogs is keep them in a healthy weight range. Controlling a dog's daily calorie intake can reduce the risk for obesity and other diseases such as osteoarthritis. In very old dogs, it may be more important to increase their caloric and protein intake to sustain a normal physique as their body

condition and weight naturally decline with advanced age. The key principles for feeding a senior dog are to:

- control calorie intake and avoid nutrient excesses,
- ensure proper hydration, and
- provide a balanced diet that has appropriate levels of fat, protein, phosphorus, and sodium.

Portion feeding plays an important role in the feeding management of older pets. By shifting from food left out all the time to delivering your dog's daily nutrients in two or more meals, you can quickly see if your dog is eating all their food. A decreased or absent appetite can signal an underlying medical problem, and it is one of the most common reasons why dogs are taken to their family veterinarian. Portion feeding also allows you to better control exactly how many calories your dog is getting each day.

Water is the single most important nutrient for dogs of any age. Make sure your dog has regular access to fresh, clean water and monitor the amount of water left in the bowl to see if there is any reduction in water intake. Clean and freshen water bowls regularly to eliminate built-up debris that may deter a dog from drinking. You can offer canned food to increase the amount of water your dog gets, or you can try adding ice cubes to your dog's water bowl. Some owners purchase a pet drinking fountain, especially if their pet likes running water. It is also to take note of any increase in water intake; contact your veterinarian if your pet is drinking too much or too little.

Many interrelated metabolic changes occur as dogs age, and their daily energy requirements may decrease. Protein is a critical nutrient for maintaining good physical health in the face of aging. While the optimal amount of protein that should be fed to senior dogs remains a topic of discussion, there is agreement that higher protein quality is important. Although high protein food has not been shown to cause kidney disease in healthy older dogs, it is valuable to re-evaluate the protein and phosphorus levels in a dog's diet once kidney function is compromised.

It is important to include treats and snacks in any discussion with your veterinarian about appropriate food choices for your senior dog. Low-calorie treats are appropriate for dogs of any age, and typically contain fewer than 10 calories per piece. Snacks fed from the dinner table are not balanced and may contain high levels of fat and sodium. Water-based vegetables, like fresh or frozen green beans, carrots, cucumbers, broccoli, and lettuce are very low in calories and make good, guilt-free snacks for senior dogs. Likewise, small servings of apples, bananas, oranges, or various berries served fresh or frozen make excellent treats.

Below is a list of dog food brands that make good quality senior diets. Please note that we do not have a vested financial interest in any of these foods. They meet the necessary nutrition requirements from AAFCO, adhere to strict quality controls, and employ veterinary nutritionists:

- Hill's Pet Nutrition
- Royal Canin
- Purina One and Pro Plan
- Farmina Pet Foods
- Wellness Complete Health
- Merrick brands (Merrick, Castor and Pollux, Organix, Pristine)
- Acana
- The Farmer's Dog
- Just Food for Dogs