

Part One: Caring for Your Guide Dog

1. Diet

The food requirement of each dog is different and, for this reason, the advice given here is of a general nature only.

To maintain good health, your dog needs a balanced diet consisting of protein, carbohydrates, fats, minerals, vitamins, and water. These requirements can be met by feeding the diet advised by Guide Dogs of Texas (GDTx).

1.1 Obesity

Obesity is the single most common nutritional problem faced by both dogs and people in the developed world. The cause of obesity is quite simply eating more than is needed by the body, resulting in the excess being stored as fat. The problem develops gradually, so the owner will not normally notice a difference in the size of the dog until associated health problems become apparent.

When an animal is obese, normal body functions are impaired. The major conditions associated with obesity are:

- Orthopedic problems (arthritis)
- Congestive heart failure
- Breathing difficulties
- Reduced liver function
- Diabetes mellitus
- Impaired digestive function
- Increased surgical and anesthetic risk
- Reduced resistance to disease
- Heat intolerance
- Skin disease
- Reduced life expectancy

This list shows just how important the prevention of obesity is, and why it is worth slimming an overweight dog rather than leaving it to suffer from one or more of the above conditions.

If possible, your dog should be weighed at two-week intervals for the first six months after leaving GDTx and monthly thereafter. Your instructor can advise you as to the best way of doing this. By keeping a close check on your dog's weight, you will know immediately when you need to increase or decrease his/her feed.

1.2 What to Do If Your Dog Begins to Gain or Lose Weight

If you are feeding a complete (all-in-one) diet, decrease or increase the total amount by ¼ cup. If you adopt this approach, you will bring about the desired change in two-to-three weeks.

If your dog is extremely overweight, he/she may need a special diet, which can only be obtained from a veterinarian. It may even be necessary for GDTx to take your dog back to the center to ensure it regains its optimum weight.

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It is always a good idea to seek advice from GDTx before placing your dog on a weight-reducing diet.

If you are aware or suspect that your dog has obtained any food other than its normal daily ration, you should compensate for this by reducing proportionately the amount given at the following meal. Most dogs require less food to maintain their body weight as they get older, so it is important to continue to weigh your dog regularly throughout its life in order to monitor this situation.

NOTE: For making up the correct quantity of feed, always use a standard 8 oz measuring cup.

1.3 General Hints on Feeding Your Dog

It is advisable to feed your dog at regular times but not immediately after you arrive home, as this can encourage pulling and carelessness on the homeward route. Also, avoid feeding just before a car, bus, or train journey. It is better to delay feeding until you reach your destination in order to reduce the risk of your dog suffering from travel sickness.

Never feed your dog immediately before or after vigorous exercise as this can lead to conditions called gastric dilation and torsion (see 4.1), which are both life-threatening conditions.

If you have to change your dog's diet, do so over a period of four or five days. A sudden change in diet can cause an upset stomach. It is not advisable to change your dog's diet unless absolutely necessary.

It is advisable that you follow the advice and diet for your dog given to you by GDTx.

Water should be available at all times and should be changed at least once every day.

Bones

NEVER FEED COOKED BONES OF ANY KIND. Large, raw beef shinbones, which have been sawed, NOT CHOPPED, may be given. The sawed sections should be at least four inches long.

NEVER FEED CHICKEN, POULTRY, OR OTHER SMALL BONES TO YOUR DOG.

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Hints

- Never feed pork, ham, or bacon.
- Keep to a regular diet.
- Measure food accurately.
- Keep fresh water available at all times.
- Keep feeding bowls clean by washing thoroughly after use.
- Never give scraps from your own meal to your dog.
- Never feed tidbits and try to prevent others from doing so.

Advice is freely available from GDTx, so do not hesitate to contact the staff if you need help.

1.4 Dietary Supplementation

Vitamin and mineral supplements are not necessary and should not be used in your dog's diet unless your vet advises you to do so. Over-supplementation can be harmful, so your vet's instructions should be followed very carefully.