

Food, Treats & Healthy Habits

A practical approach to feeding decisions, sensible portions, and rewarding your dog.



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THE HAPPY DOG LIBRARY | FIRST EDITION

General education for companion-dog households. This book does not provide veterinary diagnosis, treatment, or an individualized behavior plan. Seek veterinary advice for health concerns and qualified help for persistent distress or unsafe behavior. No result or timetable is guaranteed. The professional organizations cited have not endorsed this publication.

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1. Build meals around a suitable complete diet

Begin with your dog's life stage, health, and individual needs. Ask your veterinarian which kind of diet is appropriate, especially for growing puppies, pregnancy, illness, or a prescribed feeding plan. A food that suits one dog may not suit another.

In the United States, look for the nutritional adequacy statement and the life stage it covers. The phrase "complete and balanced" has a different meaning from attractive front-label language. A product intended only for supplemental or intermittent feeding should not automatically become the sole everyday diet.

Do not judge a food entirely by a fashionable ingredient, a beautiful photograph, or the length of its marketing story. Useful questions include who formulates it, how quality is controlled, what nutritional information is available, and how the manufacturer answers detailed questions.

Write down the exact product name, formulation, and calorie information. Different varieties from the same company can have different energy densities. When replacing a bag, check that you purchased the intended version rather than assuming the packaging color tells the whole story.

If the dog is comfortable, healthy, and maintaining an appropriate condition on a suitable diet, there may be no need to change it simply because another product is advertised persuasively. Bring specific concerns to the veterinary team and make changes for a clear reason.

2. Measure what actually goes into the dog

A feeding plan includes meals, training rewards, edible chews, table scraps, food used with medication, and anything another household member gives. Hidden extras can make a carefully measured meal plan inaccurate. Keep a three-day record before assuming the main diet is the problem.

Use the measuring approach your veterinary team recommends. If portions are specified by weight, use a suitable kitchen scale. A heaped scoop and a level scoop are different amounts. Place the daily allocation in a labeled container if several people feed the dog.

Ask the veterinarian to help establish an appropriate energy target and body condition. Weight alone does not tell the whole story, and expected adult size is not a substitute for assessing the individual. Learn what changes to watch for and when to recheck.

Treats and other extras generally should contribute no more than 10 percent of the daily calories, with the main nutrition coming from an appropriate complete diet. Some medical feeding plans require stricter limits. Do not add supplements automatically to a balanced diet.

An arithmetic example, not a prescription

If a veterinarian sets a daily total of 500 kilocalories, 10 percent is 50 kilocalories. That leaves 450 kilocalories from the planned main diet if the full extra allowance is used. If a labeled treat contains 5 kilocalories, ten whole treats would use the entire 50-kilocalorie allowance. Your dog's target may be very different.

Breaking a treat into smaller pieces creates more reward events without increasing the total. You can also reserve part of the appropriate meal ration for training. Reward frequency and calorie quantity do not have to rise together.

3. Make feeding routines easier to manage

Choose a quiet feeding area where the dog can eat without interference. Feed household animals separately when needed to prevent competition and to know who ate what. Do not ask children to handle bowls while dogs are eating.

Discuss meal frequency with the veterinarian, particularly for puppies and dogs with medical needs. Keep fresh water available unless a treating professional gives specific instructions for a medical reason. Do not restrict drinking simply to reduce toilet trips.

When a change of food is appropriate, transition gradually according to veterinary guidance and the dog's response. Introduce one change at a time so that you can identify what may be associated with digestive upset. Persistent vomiting, diarrhea, poor appetite, or other concerning signs need professional advice.

Store food according to the manufacturer's directions and retain identifying information such as lot numbers and expiry dates. Clean bowls and food toys appropriately. Keep food away from pests and prevent pets from entering storage containers or discarded packaging.

If the dog suddenly refuses a familiar meal, look at the whole situation rather than immediately adding richer toppings. Appetite changes can have medical causes. Ask your veterinarian when to seek care, especially for young, frail, or medically vulnerable dogs.

4. Understand homemade and raw feeding claims

A mixture of meat, vegetables, and rice is not automatically a complete diet. Nutrient balance matters over time, and deficiencies or excesses may not be obvious from how enthusiastically the dog eats. Homemade full diets should be formulated for the individual by an appropriately qualified veterinary nutrition professional.

Follow a professionally formulated recipe exactly, including supplements and specified ingredient amounts. Substituting an ingredient or omitting a supplement can change the nutritional balance. Ask the formulator how to handle unavailable ingredients rather than improvising.

A treat recipe is not a meal recipe. Even simple foods that are appropriate in small quantities can displace essential nutrition when they become a large part of daily intake. Keep occasional snacks within the planned allowance and account for the dog's medical restrictions.

Raw animal products can carry pathogens and create risks for both pets and people handling them. Discuss those risks with your veterinarian, particularly in households with vulnerable people. Claims that a diet is "natural" do not establish that it is nutritionally appropriate or microbiologically safe.

Be skeptical of promises to cure itching, cancer, anxiety, or every digestive issue through one ingredient or supplement. Diet can be important in medical care, but diagnosis and treatment require an individualized assessment. Keep a list of all products so the veterinarian can evaluate the complete picture.

5. Simple reward preparations

The following are serving ideas, not balanced diets or tested therapeutic recipes. Use only ingredients your veterinarian considers suitable for your dog. Start with a tiny amount, adapt the size and texture to the dog, supervise eating, and avoid ingredients excluded by a medical or allergy plan.

The familiar-food reward pot

Measure the day's appropriate dry-food portion. Reserve a small part in a clean container for practice. Use one piece at a time for easy skills and return unused food to the planned meal allocation. This is the simplest way to make training fit the established diet without introducing new ingredients.

The soft-food activity dish

Measure a small amount of the dog's usual suitable wet food from the daily allocation. Spread it thinly on a clean, dog-appropriate feeding surface. Supervise, remove the item if the dog chews the container, and clean it after use. Start with an easy presentation; frustration is not the goal.

Plain cooked chicken training pieces

For a dog who can have chicken, use thoroughly cooked, boneless, skinless chicken without salt, sauces, onion, or garlic. Cool safely, cut into tiny suitable pieces, and count them as extras. Refrigerate promptly, prepare small quantities, and follow normal cooked-food safety guidance. Discard food left out too long or showing spoilage; do not treat homemade snacks as shelf-stable.

Soft carrot bites

If suitable for the dog, wash and cook plain carrot until soft, let it cool, and cut into small pieces appropriate to the dog's swallowing style. Offer a little as an occasional snack. Avoid hard chunks for dogs who gulp or have dental difficulty. A vegetable is not automatically calorie-free or suitable for every medical condition.

You do not need a large recipe book to reward generously. Tiny portions, good timing, safe textures, and foods that already suit the dog often do more for everyday training than elaborate baking.

6. Keep hazards out of reach

Common food hazards include chocolate, caffeine, grapes and raisins, xylitol, alcohol, macadamia nuts, onions, garlic, and raw yeast dough. This is not a complete toxicology list. Products can contain unexpected ingredients, so read labels and secure food, chewing gum, supplements, and rubbish.

Do not assume a small-looking amount is harmless. Risk depends on the substance, concentration, amount, and dog. If ingestion may have occurred, contact veterinary or poison-control help promptly with the packaging and estimated amount. Do not wait for symptoms or use a home remedy.

Bones and very hard chewing items can cause injury or other problems. Ask the veterinary team about options suited to your dog's teeth, size, and chewing behavior. Supervision reduces some risks but cannot make every object safe.

For weight concerns, focus on a consistent plan rather than blame. Record current intake honestly, agree on the feeding approach with the veterinarian, and schedule reassessment. Do not sharply restrict a puppy or sick dog's food using a generic weight-loss rule.

The weekly food review

Check the actual meal amount, extra-food count, supply remaining, and any change in appetite, stool, weight, or comfort. Ask every caregiver about snacks. Make only the adjustments recommended for your dog, and record the date so that later changes can be interpreted accurately.

Feeding well is less about finding a magical ingredient and more about choosing an appropriate diet, using a workable routine, and responding thoughtfully when the dog's needs change.

Sources & further reading

Selected professional resources supporting the safety and care approach. Accessed September 22, 2026. These references are not endorsements, and this collection has not received independent veterinary review.

R5 | American Animal Hospital Association

Feeding Plans for Healthy, Appropriate Weight Cats and Dogs

<https://www.aaha.org/resources/2021-aaha-nutrition-and-weight-management-guidelines/feeding-plans-for-healthy-appropriate-weight-cats-and-dogs/>

R6 | AAHA

Home-prepared Diets

<https://www.aaha.org/resources/2021-aaha-nutrition-and-weight-management-guidelines/home-prepared-diets/>

R7 | AAHA

Raw Protein Diet

<https://www.aaha.org/resources/2021-aaha-nutrition-and-weight-management-guidelines/raw-protein-diet/>

R8 | ASPCApro

People Foods Pets Should Never Eat

<https://www.aspcapro.org/resource/people-foods-pets-should-never-eat>