



Growing Puppy Nutrition and Exercise FAQ

Authored by: Jennifer Larsen, DVM, ACVN

VP Client Information Sheets

Some owners of a new puppy might not have had a puppy in many years, or it might be their first puppy, and veterinary recommendations about nutrition and exercise for the puppy's best long-term health can change over the years. With the proliferation of large breed-specific and all-life-stage diets, it's sometimes difficult to know what is marketing hype from pet food manufacturers, what level of exercise is safe, and what the veterinary community recommends. The choices can impact the puppy's health in years to come, so it's best to understand the recommendations so you can make an informed choice.



First and foremost, talk to your veterinarian with any questions about your puppy. Your veterinarian is likely to become your puppy's health-care specialist for years to come, and getting to know you and your puppy is important.

Nutrition

Q: What are the recommendations of veterinary nutritionists for switching pups and growing dogs onto adult maintenance diets?

A: Dietary requirements of puppies differ from those of adult dogs. Mostly, they have different requirements for calcium and phosphorus, which are required for bone growth, and puppies usually have a higher calorie requirement than adult dogs of a similar size — pups simply burn more energy!

The standard recommendations are to feed "growth" diets until the dog reaches approximately 80% of the anticipated adult size. This generally occurs at around 12 months of age for small and medium-breed dogs, and around 18-24 months for large and giant-breed dogs. Current conventional recommendations are to feed growth diets until this time, but feeding such a diet for a slightly longer period will not be harmful. However, over the long term, growth diets would make most adult dogs gain unwanted weight.

Q: Is it necessary to feed puppies "puppy food" and adult dogs "adult maintenance food?"

A: Most veterinary nutritionists suggest using diets that are specific for each life stage (growth, adulthood, reproduction). However, some foods marketed as maintenance diets are formulated and/or tested for "all life stages." Determining the correct diet can be confusing. For example, both Purina Puppy Chow and Purina Dog Chow are formulated for "all life stages."

Q: What is the difference between "regular" and "large-breed" growth diets?

A: The major difference between regular and large-breed growth diets is the energy density and calcium content. Large-breed growth diets are less energy dense in order to reduce the risk of overfeeding, which will lead to obesity — an all-too-common problem in today's pets. Being overweight is a risk factor for developmental orthopedic disease. In most cases, nutritionists recommend a food that has passed the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) feeding trials for growth that is made by a reputable pet-food company and marketed specifically for large-breed or giant-breed growth. However, regular puppy diets can safely be fed to any breed if the puppy is kept lean.

Q: Can I harm my puppy by feeding an adult diet earlier than recommended?

A: In most cases, you will not harm your puppy. However, if you have a large-breed or giant-breed dog, the difference in calcium and phosphorus and in calories between large-breed growth diets and some adult maintenance diets can disrupt normal bone growth, leading to developmental orthopedic problems that might require surgical correction. Some adult maintenance diets, especially those formulated as high protein or grain free, tend to be energy- and mineral-dense and may promote obesity and/or exceed the safe upper limit for calcium intake for growing puppies as set by the National Research Council. Therefore, providing a diet with the appropriate balance of calcium and phosphorus but with a lower calcium content and lower energy density than a regular growth diet is likely safer for growing large-breed and giant-breed dogs. Studies in Great Danes have shown that orthopedic abnormalities can occur if the calcium content is too high, even if the calcium:phosphorus ratio is correct. Large-breed growth diets have been formulated to limit both calories and calcium content.

Q: Can I limit calories by switching giant-breed dogs over to adult food at 6 months of age to reduce the growth rate?

A: There are two reasons why this approach is not recommended. The first is that adult diets often have calcium-phosphorus ratios, or absolute amounts of these minerals, that are inappropriate for growing giant-breed dogs. This can affect bone development in these breeds, who are still undergoing rapid growth at 6 months and beyond.

Diets marketed as adult foods may be as energy-dense as those marketed as puppy diets, especially if they are formulated to meet AAFCO nutrient profiles for all life stages (which is the same as growth/gestation/lactation formulations).

Therefore, simply switching to an adult food at any arbitrary age is not advised. It is best to simply control the calories consumed by regularly assessing the puppy's body condition and appropriately adjusting the amount fed.

The recommendation to switch to adult foods at 6 months of age is outdated, yet they are often still promoted by many breeders; it was generally recommended by veterinarians before the advent of growth diets. However, since the development of large-breed growth diets, which have been specifically created to help reduce overfeeding as well as meet the requirements of growing large-breed dogs, these recommendations are obsolete.

You cannot determine suitability of a food by looking at the label or the marketing claims. Instead, you have to examine the AAFCO statement and then look at the nutrient analysis to determine whether calcium, phosphorus and energy density are appropriate for growing large-breed dogs. Remember, as energy density and/or calorie intake increases, the calcium intake will also increase.

There are no AAFCO recommendations for growing large-breed puppies, as their recommendations are for growth in general with no distinction for various breed sizes or growth rates. Recommendations for growing puppies are from the National Research Council, which are based mainly on experimental comparisons between miniature poodles and Great Danes.

Q: How can I limit calorie intake in my growing giant-breed puppy to reduce the growth rate?

A:

The easiest way is to adjust the amount of the growth diet. The correct amount of food is the amount that allows the growing dog to maintain a lean body condition; the best body condition score is 4/9 on [the guide](#) originally developed by Purina. Learn to assess your puppy's body condition score regularly and adjust the amount fed accordingly. This ensures that nutritional requirements are met but that growth is controlled to reduce the risk of developmental orthopedic disease. Growth rates and energy needs can vary between individual dogs, even siblings, so it's best to start with a ball-park amount and then adjust the diet to an individual puppy.



Q: What should I do if my puppy already has developmental orthopedic disease?

A: If you are concerned your puppy has developmental orthopedic disease, the diet should be carefully evaluated and adjusted if necessary. Your veterinarian might be able to help confirm or allay your concerns, and can consult or recommend a consultation with a veterinary nutritionist for advice if necessary. Your veterinarian is also best able to help correct the orthopedic problem.

Q: What should I do if my puppy is overweight or obese?

A: Feed less and increase low-impact activity such as swimming or leash walking. In most cases, reducing calorie intake while continuing to feed the large-breed growth diet should allow the dog to return to a normal body condition while maintaining appropriate balances of other nutrients. Specifically designed weight-loss diets are generally only recommended for adult dogs. If severe calorie restriction is necessary, this should be done in consultation with a veterinary nutritionist or your veterinarian. For these reasons, prevention is preferred.

Q: Are there any home-made diets that I can give to my large-breed puppy?

A: Not if you are looking for an off-the-shelf or out-of-the-book home-made diet. There is too much potential for error in estimating calcium and phosphorus as well as other essential nutrients. If you are serious about feeding a home-made diet, have a clinical veterinary nutritionist formulate an

individualized diet for your specific pet. Using a generic diet recipe is a recipe for disaster! Most raw diets do not have an energy, calcium or phosphorous concentration considered appropriate for large-breed and giant-breed dogs.

Exercise

Q: I want to take my large-breed puppy jogging or running. When is it safe for the puppy to go running?

A: There are no hard and fast rules for exercising growing large-breed puppies. And there is even less scientific data supporting specific exercise loads in growing dogs. Therefore, common sense should prevail.

Most young dogs (5-12 months) have enough energy to keep up with a person jogging, but not enough brains to know when to stop, so they would just keep going until they dropped – they're like teenagers! Running and jogging is forced exercise for dogs; forced exercise is anything beyond what the puppy would do when playing with dogs of the same age.

Unfortunately, the stresses that forced exercise places on a growing and immature skeletal system may result in long-term damage. Dogs with a predisposition to osteochondritis dessicans or [hip dysplasia](#) who are restricted in their level of exercise during development have less severe issues than those given unlimited exercise. Since many of the larger breeds suffer from these joint diseases, it seems prudent to wait until growth plates close before subjecting them to vigorous or forced exercise.

In most of these breeds, the growth plates close around 12 months. Waiting until these dogs are 12-15 months old, which allows adequate skeletal development, will allow you to enjoy many more years of exercising with your dog than you would if you let the puppy run as much as desired.

One reasonable analogy is that a 5-6 month old dog is biologically equivalent to an 8-12 year-old child (i.e., a pre-pubescent). It is unreasonable to expect an 8-year-old child to run 3-5 miles per day with an adult at a pace of 8 minutes per mile. Another similar analogy is the horse industry, which races 2-year old horses. The risk of carpal and other injuries in horses forced to gallop as 2-year olds is substantially higher than in 3-year olds because of immature growth plates and cartilage.

Q: What exercise is appropriate for my growing large-breed puppy?

A: Puppies and growing dogs should not be forced to exercise. Remember, forced exercise is anything beyond what the puppy would do when playing with dogs of the same age. Thus, a 4-month-old dog running fences with adult dogs would be considered forced exercise. Similarly, running with people is forced exercise, as is excessive stick-chasing or disc catching. Swimming, however, is not stressful on joints or bones, so dogs can be physically conditioned by swimming.

Copyright 2013 - 2017 by the Veterinary Information Network, Inc. All rights reserved.

Permanent Link: [//www.VeterinaryPartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&A=3501](http://www.VeterinaryPartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&A=3501)