

Maintaining Optimal Body Condition for Health and Performance

As mentioned in the first article, “Basic Feeding Considerations for the Hardworking Dog”, maintaining your hardworking dog with a healthy body condition is critical to its health and performance in the field.

What is body condition and why is it important? Body condition is a way of estimating if your dog is too thin, just right, or over weight, without actually putting the dog on a scale to measure body weight. This is important for 2 reasons, first, ideal body condition is associated with a healthy proportion of lean tissue (muscle) and body fat, and second, most pet owners probably don’t have a scale that is ideally suited for our 4-legged companions.

There are simple things you can learn and regularly monitor to ensure that your dog is getting the right amount of food to maintain a healthy weight and contribute to overall health.

Very simply, the best way to monitor your dog’s body condition will be to use your eyes and hands to observe subtle changes with your dog, as opposed to trying to get your dog on a scale on a weekly basis to monitor body weight. Regularly observing your dog’s body condition will assist you in assessing changes to your dog’s calorie need as you progress through the season and all year long. Truly, it can be as simple as assessing body condition to make appropriate adjustments to your dog’s daily feeding amount.

Three key things to observe in an ideal body condition are 1) the “hourglass” shape of the body when viewed from above, with a narrowing at the abdomen. You can see in the picture to the right that the dog on the right has an ideal “hourglass” shape, whereas with the dog on the left, this is much less noticeable.

2) A tuck in the belly when viewed from the side is also a good indicator of ideal body condition, and 3) being able to slightly feel the individual ribs, possibly without being able to see the ribs. Of course this last characteristic will be dependent on the coat of the pet. You likely pet your dog daily; why not also pet down the dog’s sides to feel the ribs. Undoubtedly, your dog will enjoy the attention, and you will be assessing your dog’s body condition. Additional Illustrations and review of this information can be found below or at the website below:

(<http://www.longliveyourdog.com/twoplus/RateYourDog.aspx>).





What is body condition score? You can go one step further and score your dog's body condition status. Nestlé Purina has a 9-point scoring system to assess your dog's body condition, and is summarized below. An ideal body condition ranges from 4 to 5. This system is a bit more advanced and can be another way you can have detailed discussions with your veterinarian, who will likely have a copy of the Nestlé Purina body condition scoring system.

So how do we use this knowledge to adjust feeding amounts to accommodate changes in body condition outside of what is ideal? As mentioned in article #1, the best way to adjust feeding amount is with small increments gradually to minimize significant increases or decreases in food. This will assist in maintaining a stable metabolism and minimize a loss of muscle, which is especially important in the case of trying to reduce body condition score in a dog with excess body weight.

A 14-year study led by Nestlé Purina scientists demonstrated that maintaining dogs (Labrador Retrievers) in lean body condition throughout life extended their healthy years, by 1.8 years for dogs in the study. How did they determine this? The dogs fed to maintain a lean body condition were only fed 25% less than their littermates, who were allowed to consume an adequate amount without being overweight. Ultimately, this study contributed to our current understanding of body condition assessment and healthy body condition.

There were many amazing things that were learned in this study, but it is worth mentioning one set of details. Treatment of certain chronic health conditions was delayed approximately 2 years in the lean-fed dogs. More specifically, treatment for osteoarthritis was delayed with the reduced feeding portion. In fact, 43 of the 48 dogs on the study were treated for osteoarthritis. However, we found that when half of the lean-fed dogs were started on an osteoarthritis treatment, the mean age was ~ 13.3 yrs old, this was a 3 year delay compared to their littermates, where half had started treatment at an average age of 10.3 yrs old. That alone could be a considerable reduction in associated trips to the veterinarian and possible medication. Regardless of vet costs, which we would undoubtedly do, this means a healthier life into those later years, and possibly several more years in the field.

Use these tips and talk to your veterinarian to assess your dog's overall health and body condition.

Body Condition Score and Summarize Description

Too Thin

1. Ribs, lumbar vertebrae, pelvic bones and all bony prominences evident from a distance. No discernible body fat. Obvious loss of muscle mass.
2. Ribs, lumbar vertebrae and pelvic bones easily visible. No palpable fat. Some evidence of other bony prominence. Minimal loss of muscle mass.
3. Ribs easily palpated and may be visible with no palpable fat. Tops of lumbar vertebrae visible. Pelvic bones becoming prominent. Obvious waist.



Ideal

4. Ribs easily palpable, with minimal fat covering. Waist easily noted, viewed from above. Abdominal tuck evident.
5. Ribs palpable without excess fat covering. Waist observed behind ribs when viewed from above. Abdomen tucked up when viewed.



Too Heavy

6. Ribs palpable with slight excess fat covering. Waist is discernible viewed from above but is not prominent. Abdominal tuck apparent.
7. Ribs palpable with difficulty; heavy fat cover. Noticeable fat deposits over lumbar area and base of tail. Waist absent or barely visible. Abdominal tuck may be present.
8. Ribs not palpable under very heavy fat cover, or palpable only with significant pressure. Heavy fat deposits over lumbar area and base of tail. Waist absent. No abdominal tuck. Obvious abdominal distension may be present.
9. Massive fat deposits over thorax, spine and base of tail. Waist and abdominal tuck absent. Fat deposits on neck and limbs. Obvious abdominal distention.

