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Some Straight Talk About Obesity

Nutrition and Health By Dr. John L. Mara

Dr. David Kronfeld's March article on obesity prompted one veterinarian to send us his opposing views on the subject. In the interest of a fair presentation of a serious problem for many dog owners, whether conditioning a dog for show or field or for just sitting by the fireside, we have asked retired veterinarian John L. Mara, D. V.M. to write this month's column, stating his findings over 28 years as a clinical veterinary nutritionist. Dr. Kronfeld's column will return next month.

---The Editors

Very few people realize how important good nutrition is to health, appearance and performance in the family pet or kennel dog. Most people realize that obesity adversely influences how we look, feel and perform.

As a clinical veterinary nutritionist with 28 years of experience in a busy small animal practice, I believe strongly that dog owners should consider obesity a serious problem.

I estimate that nearly 60% of the patients in my Huntington, Long Island practice were overweight. It is certain that many medical problems related to malnutrition were directly due to its consequence — obesity.

Skin lesions caused by fatty acid deficiencies, an increased tendency to heat stroke, additional surgical and anesthetic risk are only a few of the well-known hazards that threaten the overweight animal.

Owners of all classes of pets, whether used for show, working, field trial, breeding, Seeing Eye, guard dog, senior citizen companion or just a pal to the young child,

should be encouraged to accept the obligation to properly care for their canine charges. Feeding should not be at the whim of the owner, but reflect instead caring and intelligence.

Many lay people anthropomorphize — that is, attribute human traits to their animals—and many commercial pet food manufacturers play on this by telling prospective buyers that "meat chunks," "all meat," "beef flavored," "chicken flavored" or Southern style" somehow matters to the pet. In reality, these names do no more than humanize the products. Nutritionists know that is not the way to choose the right food for your canine.

If a dog receives nothing but an intelligently selected food from weaning on, good nutrition is likely to follow. Believe it or not, the typical dog won't overeat if left to his own free choice. Dogs normally eat to satisfy their caloric needs, provided they are fed a nutritionally balanced diet. They eat to satisfy their hunger.

Nutritional authorities recognize that different dogs have different nutritional needs based on age, activity level and temperament. Because of these needs, each animal requires a specific or scientifically formulated food. A growing puppy must have twice as many calories derived from good quality protein, fat and carbohydrate (all with ample well-balanced vitamins and minerals) as it will as an adult non-working dog.

An active dog will require increased supplies of energy to meet its working life style. A nursing bitch will need up to three times her

normal calories and twice the protein, vitamins and minerals.

Finally, a dog in middle age is experiencing several changes in its systems and the right food for him offers fewer calories, less protein, more zinc, more essential fatty acids and an increased amount of B vitamins and certain minerals, such as readily absorbed sources of calcium.

No single dog food can meet all these varying needs. One of the most common mistakes in feeding dogs is expecting to meet individualized nutritional needs with one "all-purpose" dog food. A food low in calories will cause some animals to lack energy. A food high in calories can often encourage obesity. This is especially true when a food lacks nutritional balance.

Since a dog eats to meet its caloric needs, it follows that just cutting down the amount fed may well result in depriving the animal of sufficient protein, vitamins and minerals.

A diet that relies on supplements such as table scraps not only makes calorie control impossible but also unbalances the food even further.

Hazards of Obesity

Nutrition balance is essential to the control and prevention of malnutrition, especially obesity. Feeding a dog to meet its calorie needs is a discipline that can't be ignored, for in fact even the active working dog can be made overweight.

And fat isn't healthy, that's another of the old wives' tales and folklore fancy related to earlier notions of judging livestock. It was desirable in earlier days to feed hogs up to 400 pounds—mostly fat,

with very little lean meat. Today's discerning market isn't interested in a pork carcass over 250 to 275 pounds. The overfed porker is just a waste of valuable nutrients.

The modern-day judge of show dogs and the trained eye of the veterinarian easily discern the difference between the fat animal and the dog with sturdy bones, well-muscled frame and glistening shiny coat that just glows with good health. It's not fat that makes show trim — it's good balanced nutrition.

It's tough being the owner of an overweight dog. Relating to the Drinking Man's Diet — or any other fad diet for humans — doesn't help since dogs aren't people. The owner needs to be encouraged to recognize that obesity is not necessary, not justifiable, and a threat to health, to reproduction and even to life itself.

Ask the veterinarian who has to perform emergency abdominal or chest surgery on a canine patient 30 to 40% overweight, contending as he must with increased anesthetic need and bleeding from fat-infiltrated, fragile blood vessels. Or look at the same obese dog and note the curving leg bones and splayed feet.

Recognize the misplaced kindness of translating love to food and feeding. Better to give a dog a pat instead of a patty, and to show affection and enhance the pet/owner relationship by taking the dog for an exercise outing.

Some Reasons For Overweight

It will help to recognize some of the reasons your animals overeat. A litter of puppies at weaning may include certain dominant members who will overeat to express superiority over their mates. After four months of age, this habit tends to continue, even in the absence of sibling rivalry. An animal like this needs to be reassured with love and exercise, and a firm control of calories.

An animal fed a diet low in good quality protein and high in readily available energy will want to overeat to satisfy its basic "hidden hunger" for protein. Such an animal is the one who is always hungry and

paces to the refrigerator door every time it's opened. He's probably grossly overweight, because he begs continuously and someone in the family or kennel usually yields to "feed the poor doggie!" This syndrome can usually be controlled by reviewing the dog's diet and correcting it with a food that's nutritionally balanced.

Then there's the nervous or tense animal reacting to stress as many people do. How often do we say, "I always overeat when I'm upset?" This animal may be burning up calories at a high rate, but he can still become obese if fed every time he wants to eat. Conscious tailoring of caloric intake to caloric needs is essential for these "impulse eaters."

His counterpart, the "hard keeper" is on the opposite pole of the metabolic scale and again, tailoring the diet to the animal's individual needs and feeding habits is the key to good nutrition.

Professional Help

It is essential to seek expert nutritional counsel the advice and of an informed, caring veterinarian to determine the status of the dog's health. As the expert, he can evaluate a dog's ideal weight.

The veterinarian can select the safe diet to assist the dog to effective weight control. He can recommend a food that contains up to 40% fewer calories than conventional pet foods. The Atwater factors — 4 Calories per gram of protein and carbohydrate and 9 Calories per gram of fat — require that fat be restricted. But fat restriction must be scientifically planned to allow ample supplies of the essential fatty acids so necessary for good skin health. A show dog won't blow its coat using a reducing diet recommended by a veterinarian.

Naturally, the timing of weight loss is important. Weight-reducing programs should be scheduled so normal weight can be achieved before a planned pregnancy or a strenuous tour of the show or field trial circuit.

Once normal weight is established, a veterinarian can determine a nutritional profile — a canine pro-

file analysis, if you will — to aid in selecting the right food balanced to provide good quality protein and energy sources and vitamins and minerals. This individual profile will reflect the specific nutritional requirements related to the animal's age, environment, activity level and temperament. This is the key to weight control and prevention of obesity — and the key to good performance and health!

I encourage all dog owners to accept the challenge of weight control for their dogs. My many years of clinical practice have proved over and over again that obesity, which is always a threat to good health, and sometimes to life itself, is preventable and curable.

Many dog owners have told me, through the years, of the frustration of trying to keep their show animals in normal weight and good conditioning. My answer has been uniform and effective — good nutrition makes all the difference between success and failure. Most of us have a high emotional and monetary investment in our animals. So it's critical to understand that a lackadaisical attitude toward diet is likely to have a penalty — in this case, obesity.

It is important to regularly consult a veterinarian. He is professionally committed to good nutrition. I love to quote the immortal Will Rogers. He said "I think the best doctor in the whole world is the veterinarian. He can't ask his patient what's wrong — he's just got to know." He does, too.

Optimum health, feeling good and top performance are all fun — for the pet owner and his dog. Good nutrition is the route to a fuller life and a longer one. It's worth the effort!