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Feeding Guidelines for New Puppies

Affected Animals: Puppies.

Description: Deciding on what, how much, and how often to feed are the key questions that need to be addressed by the primary caretakers of a new puppy. Before introducing a puppy to a new household, owners should find out the type of food the animal has been fed, as well as its feeding schedule. Providing a similar diet will help ease the transition to the home environment.

Dog foods are available as canned or dry products. Most veterinarians recommend feeding a dry growth product because this type of dog food is less expensive than canned foods and the crunchy kibble helps to minimize tartar build-up. Canned products, however, are more palatable and can be used as periodic treats during puppy training. In addition to the extra cost, canned products must be covered and stored in the refrigerator once the can has been opened.

Dog food products made specifically for puppies should be nutritious and should promote growth; look for the words "complete and balanced" on the label. Complete and balanced products contain all the necessary nutrients, in appropriate amounts, for young, growing dogs. Owners should also check the label for the Association of American Feed Control Officials' claim, which confirms that the product has been tested in animal feeding trials.

For puppies less than 16 weeks of age, offering small meals three or four times each day may ease the transition to the new home. In addition, by feeding a meal every few hours, owners will have more opportunities to observe the animal's food intake and to train it to eliminate outdoors directly after each meal. Once the animal is six months old, the feeding schedule can be gradually shifted from the multiple daily feedings to two meals of equal portions, given in the morning and in the evening.

In considering where to feed the puppy, owners should take into consideration how they plan to manage training and housebreaking, and whether there are additional pets or children in the household. Some feeding places include a kennel, the garage, the kitchen, the bedroom, or even beside the owner's chair in the living room.

Some puppies do very well when food is made available all the time -- an approach called ad libitum or free choice feeding. However, many young dogs tend to overeat with this

method, and the extra weight they carry as puppies can lead to health problems as they get older. Feeding instructions listed on pet food packages offer reasonable recommendations to follow for about two weeks with the initiation of the diet; after that, owners should adjust the quantity of food provided at each meal based on the animal's body condition.

A puppy with good body condition should have an hour-glass shape when viewed from the aerial view, or from above. In contrast, a puppy that is overweight will not have any definition or shape around the midsection. Owners can assess body condition by running their hands over the dog's ribcage to feel the ribs. The ribs should be distinguishable by palpation, but not visible. The animal may be too thin if the ribs can be seen; if so, the owner should increase the total calorie intake. However, if there is too much fat over the rib cage, and the puppy's ribs cannot be distinguished, the total amount of calories allowed should be reduced.

Most puppy owners want to feed treats or snacks of some kind, and there are several commercial pet treats available in grocery stores, pet specialty shops, and even on the Internet. The use of treats as rewards during training is appropriate, but the portions should be small because most treats, snacks, and human scraps fed to puppies are a source of extra calories. To avoid problems such as obesity and diarrhea, treats and snacks of all kinds should not make up more than 10 percent of the puppy's total caloric intake; this guideline applies to adult dogs as well.