

Health Story

Overweight Dogs Suffer in Silent Pain

by Brenda Forsythe

Haven't we all taught our Golden Retrievers that going potty outside is a good thing and deserving of a treat? And does he now just step outside, turn right back around, and head for the treat jar? Mine does. I used to tell my husband, "He's not begging, he's just hoping." But in the long run, I realized that I wasn't just spoiling my dog with treats—I was actually doing him harm.

Golden Retrievers, like many other canine breeds, are big eaters and can easily chow down enough to wind up in the obese category (see below). And what lies in store for fat Golden Retrievers isn't nice: they'll lead a shorter, more painful life. Obesity is responsible for creating and aggravating serious health problems. It can cause stroke, diabetes, shortness of breath, and heart attacks, and can aggravate epilepsy. Overweight dogs with conditions such as arthritis, hip dysplasia, and over-angulated joints (pasterns, hocks, and stifles) suffer greater pain. They can get pressure sores from supporting too much weight on their elbows and hocks when reclining. Playing too hard at games such as retrieving a tennis ball or jumping into a pond can spell

real trouble for obese dogs: they cannot easily control their own movements and are extremely prone to injuries caused by twisting and turning sharply and jumping. Blown cruciate ligaments (in the knees) are the most common.

The good news? Obesity in dogs is **preventable and reversible**. But we have to be willing to take responsibility to keep our dogs fit and trim. We have to keep their best interests at heart and realize that what they're "hoping" for isn't always food. A pat on the head or a scratch behind the ears is a great reward!

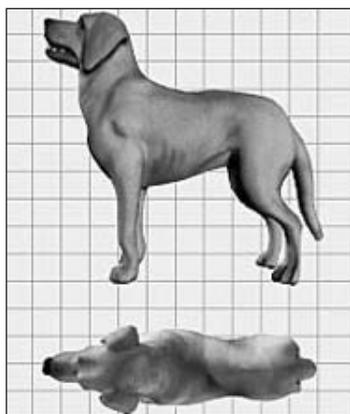
Never, never free feed your Golden. To keep your dog lean and healthy, feed him twice a day. If you give him the same total amount but all at one go, it can actually cause him to gain weight: with only one feeding, his metabolism will slow down. Most adult Golden Retrievers should eat between 1 and 1½ cups at each of their two meals (growing puppies need about twice that much), but you'll be the best judge of the right amount; adjust it up or down as needed, depending upon the dog's level of activity.

A dog at ideal weight will have a clearly defined waist—and even though you should not see his ribs, you should be able to feel them pretty easily just below the skin (to check, put your thumbs on his backbone and press your fingers against his sides). His breastbone should be easy to feel, too.

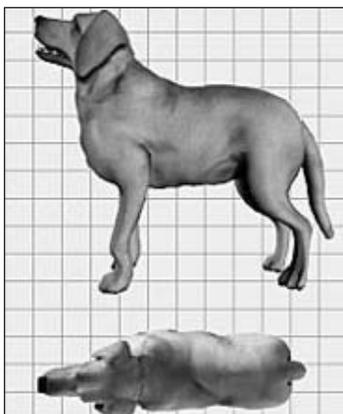
Feed the best-quality food you can afford. It's more expensive, but you'll actually feed less due to the high-quality ingredients (and you'll be picking up less poop!). Stay away from grocery store brands or "lite" foods, as they typically contain ingredients that add bulk but lack nutritional value or are high in carbohydrates—which, though they don't contain fat, do eventually turn into fat in an inactive dog.

What makes a Golden more excited than a treat? His LEASH! And those walks are one of the best ways to keep your dog fit and trim. If he's overweight, start with a 10-minute walk each day, then add a minute a day until you're up to half an hour. Aerobic activity is good for them and it's good for us, too!

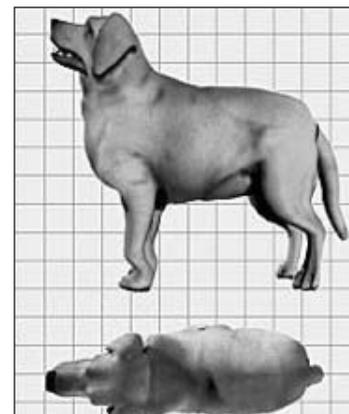
If you've determined that your dog is overweight or obese, there are a few other



■ **Ideal** – Ribs can be felt, but not visible. Waist obvious when viewed from above, and abdomen tucked up when viewed from the side.



■ **Overweight** – Ribs hard to feel, covered by fat; noticeable fat deposits over back and base of tail; waist and abdominal tuck are barely noticeable.



■ **Obese** – Ribs cannot be felt; under heavy fat covering; massive fat deposits. Waist barely visible or absent. No abdominal tuck.



tried and true ways to banish those extra pounds (assuming the dog is an average size Golden). Before placing your dog on a diet, however, you should rule out any underlying medical issues that may be contributing to his weight gain (such as low thyroid). Then try these tactics:

- Buy him a smaller bowl, you'll be less likely to think, "oh, that can't possibly be enough!" when you dish up his meals.
- After morning exercise, feed him $\frac{3}{4}$ cup adult dog food with one of the following mixed in: $\frac{1}{2}$ cup green beans, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup carrots, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup pumpkin, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup zucchini.
- At noon, feed him a chopped or sliced apple or big carrot.
- In the evening, repeat the morning meal.

The veggies you use to bulk out meals can be fresh, frozen, or canned (no salt added). Experiment to find what your dog likes best; any high-fiber, low-calorie veggie will do. (Avoid onions, though, as they can be toxic if given in large amounts.) The trick here is to satisfy your dog's hunger without giving him extra calories. My dogs love

green beans! Once your dog has achieved his goal weight, find his feeding/exercise balance point—cautiously increase his rations until you figure out how much he can eat and still keep to a lean, healthy weight.

When it comes to treats, try baby carrots, green beans, bell pepper strips, apple wedges, banana slices, mini rice cakes, or even an ice cube from the freezer. (Don't feed grapes—they can be toxic to dogs if given in quantity.)

We all want our dogs to live long, healthy lives. The best way to get them there is to provide top-quality food, regular vet care, exercise, and grooming. Spoil your dog with love, and throw that old adage "fat and happy" right down the drain!

Editor's note: Before placing your dog on a diet you should consult with your vet and rule out any underlying medical issues that may be contributing to his weight gain (ie, low thyroid). And, exercise may exacerbate certain conditions. 

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