Feeding Senior Dogs FAQs

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

FAQs feeding senior dogs

- What are the characteristics of a good senior diet for dogs?
- At what age should I switch my adult dog to senior food (or is this really necessary)?
- Can I use the adult food on my senior dog?
- Should I give my senior dog supplements?
- My senior dog won't eat - what should I do?

What are the characteristics of a good senior diet for dogs?

Your older dog will need a well-balanced diet that is generally lower in calories, and fat yet higher in fiber. It should contain high quality protein. You may be able to continue feeding your dog her regular food, but in a smaller quantity. Or, you may need a specially formulated senior diet. Commercially prepared senior diets have a protein of around 18%, whereas, diets for dogs in renal failure are around 14% protein. If your dog has significantly decreased kidney function, then a diet lower in protein will lower the workload for the kidneys. Lower fat usually translates to lower calories so many senior diets have a fat level of around 10 to 12%. Older dogs are more prone to develop constipation, so senior diets are higher in fiber (around 3 to 5%). You can also add wheat bran to regular dog food to increase fiber intake. Finally, feeding your dog dry food (if she will eat it) will help to control tartar build-up and reduce gum disease.

[Back to Top]

At what age should I switch my adult dog to senior food (or is this really necessary)?

Veterinarians generally consider a dog in the last third of his normal life expectancy to be "older." For example, a large breed dog (such as a Great Dane) that normally lives to be 9 years old would be considered "senior" at age 6. A Poodle that normally lives to 15 years would be "senior" at 10. Of course, many exceptions exist, and if a dog is active and in good shape, he may be able to be fed the adult formulas and exercised as if he is a younger dog. Routine veterinary exams and blood testing can help determine what diet is best for your older dog.

[Back to Top]

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Can I use the adult food on my senior dog?

In general, if your senior dog has no medical problems, is not overweight, and is active, your dog may remain on the Drs. Foster & Smith Adult Dog Formula Food. The Senior Formula has fewer calories, more fiber, and less calcium and phosphorus than the Adult Formula. If you have questions regarding which food to feed your senior dog, contact your veterinarian.

[Back to Top]

Should I give my senior dog supplements?

Some older dogs will benefit from supplements. Aging dogs have special nutritional needs, and some of those can be supplied in the form of supplements.

Work with your veterinarian to develop a plan to maximize the health of your dog's joints. A daily supplement containing glucosamine and chondroitin may help, especially if combined with weight control and the proper exercise plan.

A vitamin/mineral supplement is recommended if your older dog is not receiving adequate amounts through his food. This can occur if your dog is not eating a complete balanced diet. A supplement may also benefit some older animals who tend to absorb fewer vitamins, minerals, and electrolytes through the intestinal tract, and lose more of them through the kidneys and urinary tract. Finally, some older animals eat less (due to conditions such as oral disease) and may not receive their daily needs of vitamins and minerals.

A fiber product such as wheat bran may also be given to help reduce the incidence of constipation if it occurs.

Some evidence in other species suggest that antioxidants such as Vitamins A, E, and C (ascorbic acid) may play a role in protecting against some normal aging processes.

Talk with your veterinarian to determine which supplements may be beneficial for your dog.

[Back to Top]

My senior dog won't eat - what should I do?

Most importantly, if your dog is getting thin and not eating well, he should have a complete veterinary exam to rule out any possible disease problems. If everything checks out, then you'll need to take steps to modify your dog's diet. To encourage a dog to eat more:

- If he normally eats dry food, he may have a hard time chewing the large kibble. Try feeding a smaller kibble or moisten the food with water to make it easier to chew.
- Warm canned or moistened dry food in the microwave to increase the aroma of the food. Be sure to stir the food before feeding it to your dog to avoid hot pockets in the food.
- Add other foods to increase the appeal. You may try adding a little water from canned tuna, canned dog food, a small amount of cooked chicken and broth, or cooked/boiled eggs to the food to make it more appealing. Ask your veterinarian if your dog might also have small amounts of bacon drippings, hamburger grease, clam juice, chicken drippings, or baby food added to his normal diet. (Normally, these should not be given to your dog. Only add these if approved by your veterinarian.)
- Switch to canned food (if currently feeding dry food). Consider switching to special high-calorie, nutrient-dense diets made specially for "stressed" animals.
- Feed smaller amounts of food more often. By offering a small amount of food

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several times each day, your dog may actually increase her total daily intake.
- If your dog will not eat a commercial diet, talk to your veterinarian about feeding a homemade diet formulated by a veterinary nutritionist.

Some dogs love to eat cat food, but this should be avoided, since it is too high in protein and fat.
[Back to Top]

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