



Dog food - what, when and how much?

May 09, 2012 | By David Jackson

Food glorious food! Clearly Oliver Twist didn't have a dog with a dicky tummy. For so many of us, getting our dog's diet right can be a long, stressful and often expensive affair so why is it so difficult? In this article we'll be looking at the three cornerstones of dog feeding - what, when and how much.

What to feed?

What should I feed my dog?... the eternal question.

Well, as much as I'd love to say 'you should feed brand x', I'm afraid it's never that simple. Different dogs do better on different diets so there's never any guarantee that brand x is going to suit your individual dog no matter how good its ingredients are. But don't despair! By reading labels and knowing what to look for, finding the right food can be made a whole lot easier, and this is where I can help.

Firstly, you will need to choose which category of food you would prefer to feed: wet, dry or frozen complete foods or meat and mixer. No one category is necessarily better as each includes both good and bad examples. Each type of food has its own pros and cons and the choice of which to feed is really down to which suits you best.

Complete foods

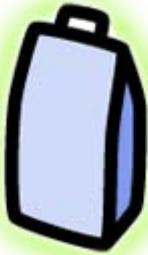
Complete foods are by far the most popular choice for dog owners in the UK. In order to be 'complete' they must contain every nutrient required by a dog in sufficient amounts to keep the dog healthy which means they can be fed alone. Complete foods can be dry, wet or frozen.

Complementary foods and mixer biscuits

Complementary foods are usually wet or frozen foods that don't contain the full range of nutrients required by a dog or contain them in inappropriate proportions. For this reason they need to be fed alongside a mixer biscuit or complete food.

Mixers are essentially cereal based filler biscuits, occasionally with vegetables or herbs. They are nutritionally incomplete (they don't contain all of the nutrients required by a dog) and so have to be fed alongside a wet or frozen food. Like all dog foods, mixers range from very good quality to very bad.

Dry foods



The majority of British dogs are fed on dry complete foods. Their popularity certainly owes a lot to their convenience as they don't need any preparation and don't have any special storage requirements.

Dry foods are made from dried and ground ingredients and can be cooked in a number of ways:

1. **Extrusion** is by-far the most common cooking method for dry dog foods. In the extrusion process, raw materials are first ground and then passed down what is essentially a giant steam cooker. After extrusion, the food is dried, cooled and is given a coating of fats and oils to enhance its flavour. Critics claim that the high pressures and temperatures involved in extrusion destroy some of the nutrients contained in the food including vitamins, some amino-acids and enzymes. Supporters, however, advocate that the cooking process increases digestibility and kills parasites.
2. **Baking** is another cooking method which allows foods to be cooked at lower pressures than extrusion and therefore may leave more of the nutrients intact. Baking does, however, rely on a certain amount of wheat gluten to bind the biscuit.
3. **Cold pressing** allows dry foods to be made without the need for potentially damaging high temperatures or pressures. Cold pressed foods are a relatively new innovation and are not yet widely available.
4. **Air drying** involves exposing the food to a current of heated air which gently removes the water from the food through evaporation. Air drying reduces the damage to proteins, vitamins and enzymes compared to conventional cooking methods.

Dry foods can be fed alongside or mixed with both wet foods and frozen foods. When mixing complete diets, you should take care not to feed too much. The easiest way would be to feed half of the suggested feeding amount of the first food with half the recommended amount of the second.



Wet foods

Wet foods are also very popular and can be found in tins, trays and pouches. Wet foods don't require any added preservatives as the cooking process kills all micro-organisms within the sealed containers. Wet foods can be complete or complementary. Since wet foods contain a

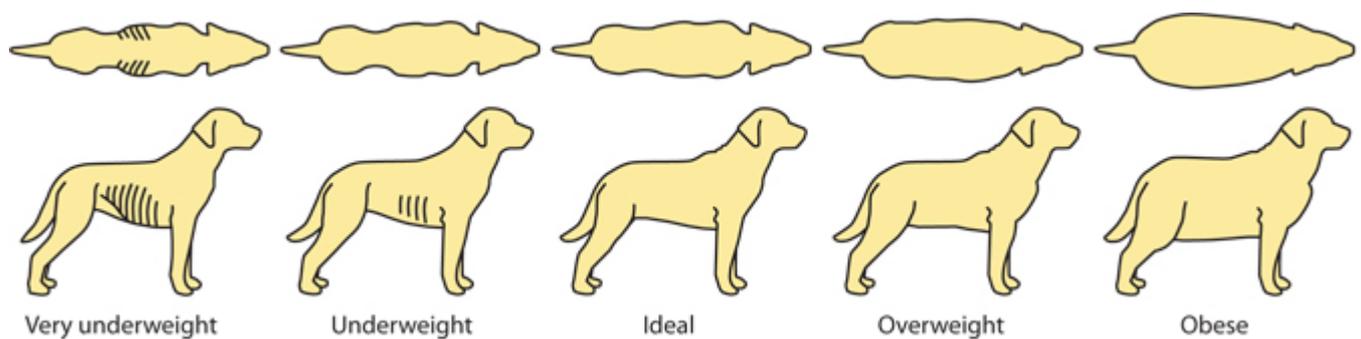
large amount of water, the feeding amounts are much higher than those of dry foods which often makes them more expensive to feed.

Frozen foods

In the last few years, frozen foods have really started to take off. Freezing is the most natural way of preserving nutrients, although the difficulty of transporting the foods and thawing them over-night makes them the least convenient category of pre-prepared dog foods. Both raw and pre-cooked frozen diets are available and like wet foods, there are both complete and complementary varieties. Also like wet foods, frozen foods contain a high proportion of water.

How much to feed?

Feeding the right amount is just as important as feeding the right food. All dog foods have feeding guidelines on the packaging. You should always start by following the guidelines for your dog's weight. Your vet will be able to tell you your dog's weight or you can stand on the scales whilst carrying your dog to calculate it at home.



Once your dog is settled on to a food, keep an eye on his weight as this is the easiest way of telling whether or not the feeding amounts are correct. Compare your dog's body shape to the dogs pictured above. Your dog is at his ideal weight when you can feel, but not easily see, the last two or three ribs and when there is an easily identifiable waist line when looking down from above. Occasionally, dogs fed too much do not gain too much weight, but instead develop digestive problems or other health issues. If a dog is fed much more than needed, the body might respond by rushing the food through in the form of diarrhoea which may in time actually lead to weight loss.

When to feed?

For the majority of healthy adult dogs, the number and time of meals is not especially important. Once you have established a feeding amount, you can basically divide it up into as many meals as you want and feed them at times to suit you. Most dog owners opt for 1-3 meals per day.

Many dog owners prefer to **free feed**. This is when food is left in the bowl and the dog is allowed to choose when and how much to eat. Although free feeding can work well with some dogs, it is always best to measure out the recommended amount at the start of the day

and top up the bowl from that. Once it's gone, it's gone. This is important to avoid over feeding and also helps to prevent fussiness.

There are, however, some exceptions. For example, if your dog becomes hungry easily it is usually best to feed several small meals to make sure the stomach isn't left empty for long periods. For dogs that sometimes go to the toilet in the house at night, it is often helpful to stick to morning or early afternoon meals to make sure the food has time to work its way through before bed time. Some health problems, like diabetes, also require careful consideration of feeding times.