

Nutrition from the Beginning of Heat until Weaning

By Dr. Sam Harkey, All About Pets

Nutrition begins PRE-Breeding and making sure that your dog is bred while in proper body condition is vital to your breeding dog's health.

A quick way to illustrate this is using your own knuckles and thinking of them as the dog's ribs. A clinched fist shows each knuckle individually and is a good illustration of a dog's ribs in very poor body condition. Holding your hand out flat with fingers out and feeling your knuckles is considered ideal body condition because you can't see each knuckle but you can feel them when palpated. Turning your hand over and feeling for your knuckles on the palm side of your hand is a good illustration of a dog that is very obese. The knuckles can't even be felt due to the fat. The primary concern in most cases is obesity vs poor body condition

Obesity causes LOWER birth weights, decreased litter size, and more post-whelping deaths due to suffocation by mom.

Goals for Nutrition:

The right diet should do more than provide calories for your dog. It should work synergistically with your dog's digestive, metabolic and immune system to maximize his health and longevity.

#1 Food as body development and maintenance = Proteins, minerals, trace elements, vitamins and some lipids do this.

#2 Food as Energy = Lipids and carbs provide this.

#3 Food as prevention = Specific nutrients incorporated into food such as antioxidants and nutraceuticals can help prevent renal infections or digestive disorders and have an "anti-aging" affect.

#4 Food as medicine = Certain nutrients add to food support the therapeutic process helping pets recover from a number of ailments.

Should I just read the label?

Law requires manufacturers to list ingredients by precooked weight in descending order. If a meat product or other high water content product will be listed at the top of the list and that makes you think that it is the main nutritional ingredient when in actuality after cooking, it may be a very minimal part of the diet.

The emphasis for nutrition has to be on nutrients vs. ingredients. A correct balance of protein, minerals, vitamins, lipids, and carbohydrates is essential and then finding the best sources of those nutrients makes a good dog food.

WHAT TO FEED PRE-BREEDING

Dogs should be fed their normal maintenance food during the breeding period.

DAY 42 OF GESTATION (In pup)

The fetuses typically change very little in size during the first 42 days of pregnancy. At day 42, the fetuses begin to grow at a very rapid rate. This requires

significantly more energy and “drain” on the mother. At this point in the pregnancy I typically will recommend a higher energy dog food (Typically a puppy food). This food should be fed through whelping and until weaning time (typically 5wks – 7 wks post whelping).

WEANING DIET

Weaning is another important point of nutrition. The puppy food that has been providing extra nutrition to help with milk production must be stopped and the dog should be switched back to its normal maintenance dog food. For the next 3-4 days the dog should be fed approximately ½ its normal intake for maintenance. Please note that this is only a temporary decrease in food intake and that doing this for a longer time frame will be unhealthy. The decrease in calories will help the mother “dry up” from lactation. **Special attention should be paid to the mammary glands during this time to make sure that mastitis does not develop.**

FEEDING THE PUPPY FROM BIRTH

Feeding the puppy will ideally begin with the nursing mother and ingesting a healthy serving of colostrum. After the first couple days, mom’s milk will drop and there will be the traditional white-like milk discharged. Pups will nurse this milk as long as they can. Typically mom or you will begin the weaning process around 5-7 weeks of age. Since we know that switching a puppy from mom to dry dog food overnight is extremely stressful, there are a few tips that will work well.

A gradual change in the pup’s main food is ideal. Start when the pup’s are around 3 weeks old providing them some puppy food that has been soaked in either water or milk replacer and mash it up good so the pups can play in it. Typically the pups get completely nasty, just like kids do on their 1st birthday. Make sure and wipe them off to prevent skin infections. There are many other remedies such as goats milk, etc. that work well too. If a pup is faced with a situation where mom is no longer in the picture (either lack of milk or complications from whelping, post-whelping hysteria, etc.) the pup may need supplementation with milk replacer. Unfortunately, there is nothing that is quite as good as mom’s milk. *Esbilac* is my preferred milk replacer but many people have good success with others and even goat’s milk. Pups will need to eat every 2 hours or so until they are around 2 weeks of age, then they can go to feeding every 3-4 hours. Teach these orphans to drink from a bowl ASAP. Most pups will drink by 3 weeks of age and this can save you a bundle of time with a bottle.

HOW LONG DO I FEED PUPPY FOOD?

Most pups will be ready to switch somewhere around 9-12 months of age. I typically go by body condition and if the pup is getting to the point they are overweight then I make the switch to adult food earlier.

PROPER BODY CONDITION IS VERY IMPORTANT!

Once again I will say this. Keeping your dog in the proper body condition will help it be more productive, live longer and live a happier life.