

## Feeding Guide: Puppy Edition



When we bring home that little bundle of fur for the first time, we all want to provide our new animal companion with the healthiest and most nutritious food.

Sometimes our furry friend comes with their own bag of food or sometimes we find ourselves in the aisle of the local pet store staring at shelves packed with so many varieties of food that the decision-making part of our brain simply short circuits.

Knowing what to feed and how to feed it can seem daunting, especially for families caring for a puppy for the first time.

Our hope is to provide you with some basic information to help you make an informed decision and offer your friend the best start in their new lives as part of your family.

### How do I choose the right food?

Sadly, in this saturated dog food market, there are simply too many diets for any veterinarian to know in detail.

The most important piece of advice is to make sure that when looking at a bag of food, make sure the letters *AAFCO* appear on the bag.

*AAFCO* stands for American Association of Feed Control Officials. The *AAFCO* is a private, non-profit association with voluntary membership. The officials, consisting of veterinarians and nutritionists, are charged with regulating the sale and distribution of animal food (including dog food). They establish the standards for ingredient definitions and proper nutritional requirements. Following *AAFCO* standards reduces the risk of malnutrition.

When you see *AAFCO* on the food bag you should also check to see if there is the word *formulated*. For example, a bag might say- *this food has been formulated to meet AAFCO guidelines*.

Many companies will take the extra measure of ensuring their food is fully balanced by hiring third parties to perform feeding trials to ensure their food meets the *AAFCO* standards. However, most foods simply add the word *formulated*. This means they did not perform any third-party trials but instead followed the written guidelines as set by *AAFCO*. You want to specifically look for the statement: "Animal feeding tests using *AAFCO* procedures substantiate that (DIET) provides



complete and balanced nutrition for..." rather than "(DIET) is formulated to meet the nutritional levels established by the AAFCO Food Nutrient Profiles..."

There is a Canadian equivalent called the Pet Food Association of Canada or *PFAC*. They follow the *AAFCO* guidelines. This means seeing *PFAC* on the bag is the same as seeing *AAFCO*.

Here at the Mer Bleue Veterinary Hospital, we will always recommend certain food manufacturers as they are known to not only follow *AAFCO* guidelines but also conduct food trial studies to prove their food provides your furry friend with the energy and nutrients they require.

We will generally advise feeding your furry friend Hill's Science Diet, Royal Canin or Purina. These are not necessarily the prescription versions but rather those which can be obtained at your local pet store or online at [www.myvetstore.com](http://www.myvetstore.com).

The *AAFCO* will specify foods which are designed for growing dogs (aka puppies). It is essential to choose these or foods designed for all life stages. Never feed a puppy a diet labeled for adult dogs as it will not provide sufficient calories or nutrients.

When feeding a diet meeting *AAFCO* standards, it is not recommended to give a puppy any vitamin and mineral supplements. These supplements can actually lead to health issues as they may lead to your furry friend receiving too much calcium and phosphorus, which can negatively affect bone development.

### **How do I feed my dog?**

It is always recommended to meal feed your furry friend rather than allowing them to free-feed (always leaving food in the bowl). Most dogs, when offered free-choice feedings, will become overweight or obese once they are adults. This cycle can even begin in the puppy stages.

Overweight puppies will have a more difficult time reaching healthy weights once they are adults.

Dogs, much like humans, are omnivores (able to eat meat and plants) and are social eaters. They mostly prefer to eat during daylight hours and like having their food bowl in a communal area of the house where they can be around other members of the family.

It is advised to feed 3 meals per day until 6 months of age, then 2 meals per day onwards. Toy breed puppies are an exception to this recommendation (read on to find out why!).

To make mealtime more interactive and to slow down how fast your puppy eats, we suggest using interactive food bowls or toys which can be obtained online at [www.myvetstore.com](http://www.myvetstore.com) or at any local pet store.

### **How much do I feed my dog?**



We consider this to be a moving target. In the first few weeks after weaning, your puppy will use 50% of its total energy for growth. Overtime, this will significantly decrease as, once they reach 80% of their adult weight, they will only use 5-10% of their daily energy for growth.

It is possible to calculate your furry friend's daily caloric needs or their Resting Energy Requirements (RER) and Daily Energy Requirements (DER) but we find the simplest method is to use the feeding guide on your furry friend's bag of dog food.

This requires you knowing your furry friend's age in months and having an approximate idea of their target adult weight. Usually, if you know the mother's or father's weight, you can make an educated guess. As your friend grows older, you simply need to adjust the amounts based on the chart found on the bag of puppy food.

It is important when giving treats to make certain they do not exceed 10% of the daily caloric requirements, especially since treats are not nutritionally balanced. A good training trick is removing a portion of your furry friend's kibbles from his or her daily feeding amount and using those kibbles as treats!

Once a puppy is spayed or neutered, their daily caloric needs will decrease by 20-25% when compared to an intact kitten of the same age. This means it is important to reduce the calories your friend is receiving once they are spayed or neutered. If you need any assistance determining how much to feed, please ask a Mer Bleue veterinarian or Registered Veterinary Technician (RVT).

When feeding your furry friend, it is more effective and precise to weigh the food in grams instead of measuring in volume (ie cups). When we measure the food in volumes, we usually end up feeding slightly too much. Overtime, this can lead to obesity. You can purchase a kitchen scale to weigh the food. Most bags of dog food will say on the bag how many grams are in each cup of food, so you can do a quick calculation to determine the amount in grams to feed.

### **Does the breed of dog affect the type of food I choose?**

There are certain types of dogs where we must be careful when choosing the type of food or the proper feeding schedule.

**Toy breeds** such as Yorkshire Terriers and Chihuahua are more at risk of developing hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). The reasons are not fully understood but are believed to be in part due to lack of fat reserves for energy and the slower development in the liver's ability to produce glucose (sugar in body). Luckily these issues resolve after a few months.

In the first 12 months of a toy breed dog's life, we advise simply feeding 4 to 6 smaller meals per day.



At the other end of the spectrum are the **large to giant breed dogs**. These are dogs weighing more than 25 kg in adulthood. These large dog breeds have a higher chance of developing joint disorders such as Hip Dysplasia when they are older.

One of the ways in which we can reduce this risk is by ensuring they do not grow too quickly or become overweight as puppies.

The best way of accomplishing this is by feeding them special puppy diets designed for large to giant breeds.

These large breed puppy diets have reduced calories and calcium when compared to other puppy foods. This in turn slows growth of the puppy and their bones.

It is never recommended to feed an adult food as a large-breed alternative as many adult foods contain too much calcium which can lead to bone issues later in life.

### **How long do I feed puppy food for and how should I change foods?**

We advise feeding a puppy food to your furry friend until they have reached 80% of the adult weight.

This means 12 months of age for small to medium breeds (less than 25 kg) and 18-24 months for large to giant breeds (more than 25 kgs).

When introducing a new food, you can offer a mix of 25% new food and 75% old food on the first day and increase the amount of new food by 25% (also decreasing the old food by 25%) until your furry friend is only eating the new food.

For puppies with picky appetites, you can offer the new food in a familiar bowl side by side with the usual food, so they have a choice. Once they begin to eat the new food you can increase the amount over a few days as described above. The new food should only be left out for an hour at a time.

### **Conclusion**

Hopefully this feeding guide has provided you with the basics on providing the best nutritional care. If you have any additional questions after reading this guide, please do not hesitate to ask any of our Mer Bleue Veterinary team members.

### **Resources**

Medical FAQs- Feeding Puppies to Optimize Growth FAQ, Mark Rishniw BCVs, MS, ACVIM (SAIM), ACVIM (Cardiology)



Puppy Power/Optimal Nutrition for Life! Western Veterinary Conference 2011, Kara M. Burns Ms, Med LVT

AAFCO Association of Animal Feed Control Officials- <https://talkspetfood.aafco.org/faq>