

## Feeding Geriatric Dogs

*<<What are the nutritional requirements for a geriatric dog vs. an adult dog? Is there anything that should ABSOLUTELY be avoided in the diet of a geriatric dog? I realize the fat content should be lower, but how much lower? What about protein?>>*

In order to answer you specifically, I would need to know the particular details of the individual dog in question. But I can answer you generally, just please realize this is broad generalization.

Larger breed dogs are considered "geriatric" beginning around age 7. Most of the changes recommended in a dog's diet are based on physiological state (age, pregnancy, etc.) and level of activity. Since older dogs generally become less active, their energy requirements change accordingly. Of course this is not true of every dog.

So if the older dog is indeed less active (compared to the same dog's activity in younger years), it follows that s/he will require less energy, which means less fat in the diet. Unlike humans, dogs are designed to obtain their energy primarily from fat. Interesting fact: sled dogs, like the Iditarod runners, perform best when fed meals that consist of pure fat, and can require upwards of 6,000 calories daily when racing. Pretty awesome, considering their body size. On the other hand, if this hypothetical older dog lives outside in cold temperatures, the energy needs remain higher in order for the dog to maintain its body temperature.

As for protein, whether to increase or decrease the amount fed to a geriatric dog depends on what type of food this dog is eating. If the dog is eating a fresh-foods diet, little to no change is required in the level of protein fed as the dog ages. The protein source in a fresh-foods diet is a much more pure and bioavailable one than that found in processed, cooked dog foods. If anything, we may want to experiment with adjusting the ratio of meat to vegetables, such that the meat component is a bit less, thereby reducing overall protein. After all, the protein level of meat is what it is, and cannot be lowered or increased except by feeding less or more meat.

If the dog is eating a processed dry food diet, the protein level is generally decreased with age. Protein levels in dry foods are quite high compared to fresh meat. This is because the quality and bioavailability of protein in processed commercial foods is much lower than that of fresh meats. The dry food must provide more than the level actually required, so that when all is said and done, the amount the dog ends up being able to assimilate is sufficient. With a processed dog food, if protein is lowered, something else must take its place, and this something would be the grain component. Dog foods already contain a disproportionate level of indigestible grain material; now we are increasing it even more in order to reduce the protein level. The theory is that it is more difficult for

the older dogs' kidneys to process large levels of protein. In my opinion, the organs of older dogs fed only commercial foods do indeed "wear out" after a life time of being overworked to process a very unnatural diet. Witness the high number of older dogs with kidney and liver problems and ask yourself why this happens so often that it is considered/accepted as "normal."

Manipulation of the fat and/or protein levels for a geriatric dog should best be determined by taking into consideration the individual's health--both current and historical conditions--and lifestyle. There is nothing in particular that older dogs absolutely should not have just because they are older. If the dog is not overweight, why not indulge a little every now and then. It's good for the mental health!

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