**Chapter 38: Obesity in Dogs**

In this chapter we will discuss the importance of keeping your guide at his or her target weight for health and longevity reasons, as well as ways to help you manage his or her weight.

Your guide dog’s health and well-being are important pieces of the puzzle in creating a long-lasting partnership with them. Please think of your guide dog as an athlete. They have been training to be a guide dog for a long time and need to be in top physical condition in order to perform their best. Dogs that are overweight have less endurance and stamina and can have a variety of health complications. A proven fact is that **overweight dogs die at a younger age than those maintained at an optimal weight.**

At your dog’s exit physical, you will be informed of what your dog’s target weight is. Our guide dogs are fully grown, and their weight should not fluctuate more than 3 pounds above or 3 pounds below their issued target weight. Your instructors will be sure to review with you how much food you should be feeding your dog when you return home. This amount is typically less than what we have been feeding while in class as well as when the dogs are in the kennel. As the dogs transition into their home environments, they often do not need as much food as they needed while being housed in the kennel and during training.

The food amount suggested is not going to be the only amount you feed for the life of your dog. Much like with humans, many factors contribute to the amount of food your dog will need. Is it a time of year you are more active or less active? Is your dog young or on the mature end? The amount of food you will need to feed depends on your personal situation. During times that you and your guide are more active, your dog may need more food. During times of less activity, such as bad winter weather or sickness for you or your dog, your dog may need less food. In addition, if you find you are using a lot of treats for training but are concerned about weight gain, you can use food taken from your dog’s measured ration for the day. Simply take a handful of food out of their measured morning meal and use that for food reward during the day. Any unused food can be added back into their evening meal. At the end of the day, maintaining your dog’s target weight is a balance of diet and exercise.

The easiest way to check your dog’s weight is to get them weighed regularly. Most vet’s offices will let you come in and weigh your dog free of charge. Many pet stores such as PetSmart and Petco also have scales and will let you weigh your dog. Just remember to take their harness off for this! We know it’s not always feasible to weigh your dogs monthly. In between times when you cannot weigh your dog there are a few ways to physically tell if your dog has gained weight:

* **By touch**: Ideally, you should be able to feel your dog’s ribs and waist. These areas should be apparent without being prominent. The ribs should have a thin layer of fat over them. Overweight dogs have increasing amounts of fat over the ribs, along the spine, and around the tail. Obese dogs have heavy fat over the ribs, along the spine, and around the tail.
* **By the harness belly strap:** Think of the belly strap as your dog’s belt. If you need to let it out because it is too tight, that is a very good indication that your dog has gained weight. If you need take it in that could indicate your dog is losing weight.

Keep in mind that many veterinarians are accustomed to seeing pet dogs, many of which are overweight. This is a good reason to schedule an appointment not long after you go home. Introduce your dog to the people at your vet office. Tell them what your dog’s ideal weight is; which is your dog’s target weight. This target weight is written on the health certificate that you bring home with you and you can give your vet office a copy of it. Explain to your veterinarian that your dog needs to stay at this weight or very close to it. That way, if Juno does put on a few pounds, your veterinarian already knows what an athletic working guide dog should look like and is prepared to help you work back to that weight.

Your dog gaining weight can happen to anyone. It has happened to instructors with their personal dogs. So, what do you do in this situation? You can contact your veterinarian to talk about a weight loss plan or contact the school. We will be happy to work with you and your veterinarian. Consider Guiding Eyes a weight watcher support group for guide dogs. Please remember, it is much easier to get 5 pounds of weight off your dog then 10 pounds or more. While it may seem like the weight was suddenly put on, it does often take a good amount of time to get the weight off.

On occasion, we have an extreme case of a dog so overweight that immediate action must be taken. We have had dogs returned from the field because they were so overweight that their health was at risk. The weight loss program at that point must be handled by professionals. Of course, we hope that this does not happen at all, as many of these dogs develop medical problems that prevent their being able to work anymore. In fact, they usually have stopped guiding effectively before they return to us.

Above all, remember that Guiding Eyes is here to help you succeed as a team. You must be your dog’s advocate where their weight is concerned. Monitoring their health and weight is the best way to ensure you are giving your dog all the tools they need to be successful long term.

*Updated September 2020*