

Dog and Small Animals Vet

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Now more than ever, owners are faced with a plethora of options when it comes to feeding their new puppy. Obviously, the ultimate aim of feeding a puppy is for them to grow into a healthy adult dog. To make matters more complex, there is no “one size fits all” approach to feeding growing dogs available. There are considerable differences both between types and breeds which need to be considered when feeding the growing dog.

The large and giant breeds of dog are one such group that have special nutritional requirements during the growing phase of their lives. Large and giant breeds of dog are predisposed to a number of diseases of the skeleton. Nutritional factors have been identified as the most important factor after genetics in the development of these skeletal diseases.

Since pet owners have only very limited influence over genetic factors (for example choosing pups that have come from parents that have been proven to be sound), correct nutrition takes on added importance, as this is something that pet owners can definitely control. The diseases that can result from incorrect feeding of these breeds can have devastating and life long effects. We now know that we can reduce the risk of some of these diseases by dietary manipulation.

So what are these skeletal diseases we are talking about? The most common ones are hip dysplasia and osteochondrosis. Both of these diseases will result in secondary osteoarthritis and joint pain. Rickets, though less common, is another potentially devastating disease that can result from improper feeding.

And what exactly is a “large or giant breed” of dog? There are many breeds that fall under this category, but as a general rule we are talking about any breeds that have a mature weight of greater than 28kg.

The main nutritional problem that may result in these skeletal diseases is called overnutrition. In essence, this means

feeding a diet with too many calories, and will result in a rapid growth rate. Compared to smaller breeds, large breeds of puppy have decreased bone density. When they are overfed, they will grow at a rapid rate, putting increased pressure on an immature skeleton that is not equipped to deal with the excess load. The end result may be bone deformities, as seen with hip dysplasia and osteochondrosis.

It is my experience that many pet owners believe allowing their puppy to eat an energy dense puppy diet freely (called ad lib feeding) will result in them achieving a larger adult body size. This is not correct. Adult body size is principally determined by genetics. Overfeeding will merely result in the dog achieving their adult size sooner.

The other important nutritional factor that can influence the development of skeletal diseases in the growing dog is calcium intake. Another common misconception is that large breeds of dog need extra calcium for normal skeletal development. Not only is this not correct, but excessive dietary calcium increases the risk of hip dysplasia and osteochondrosis. Excessive calcium can also result in deficiencies of other essential trace elements in the diet.

Dogs being fed a commercially prepared balanced diet require no additional calcium. Conversely, many home prepared diets are deficient in calcium and will require calcium supplementation. This may be the case even when bone is included in the home prepared diet.

That’s the technical detail out of the way. How do we put this into practice when feeding the large breed puppy? As always, there’s more than one way to do things.

I am a fan of home prepared diets and applaud owners who have the time and inclination to feed these diets. However, when it comes to feeding large breed dogs it is my opinion that the best way of feeding a balanced diet that minimises the risk of these developmental bone



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diseases is to feed a commercial food designed specifically for large and giant breeds. Your veterinarian can advise you about the appropriate diets and how much to feed.

For dog owners who prefer a home made diet, I would strongly recommend they consult their veterinarian, who will be able to assist in calculating quantities to feed and how much calcium to add to the ration daily.

The best advice I can give owners of large breed puppies is to “feed with

your eyes”, irrespective of whether feeding a commercial or home prepared diet. There is no formula that will provide for optimal growth in all dogs. There can be substantial differences in energy requirements from individual to individual.

Ultimately, aim to keep your growing puppy lean to reduce the risk of these skeletal diseases. The ribs should be easily felt with minimal fat covering, and the waist should be obvious when viewed from above.





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