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**“Casey’s Corner”**© Joan Merriam

# Avoiding the Pudgy Puppy Syndrome



Last month, we discussed what’s in commercial dog food, and the increasing incidence of dog food recalls. (In fact, just after we went to print, Natura Pet announced yet another recall of California Natural, Innova, and EVO due to possible Salmonella contamination.)

If, like the majority of pet owners, you choose to feed your dog commercial food, there are things you can do to ensure he’s getting the best quality possible.

First is being an informed consumer. Check the food label for the AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) statement, which shows that the food provides complete and balanced nutrition.

Next, read the ingredient list. Look for a named meat (“bison” or “lamb,” for instance, instead of the generic term “meat”) as the first ingredient. Avoid foods that list “by-product meal” or “meat and bone meal.” If you can afford them, buy foods that include organic ingredients or wild fish, poultry, or free-range meat.

Read the guaranteed analysis as well, especially crude protein, fat, fiber, and total moisture.

I recommend buying food at local pet stores where you can rely on the knowledge and expertise of the owners; I have a personal bias against grocery and warehouse pet foods, as they generally contain cheaper, poorer quality ingredients.

One increasingly popular option to commercial foods is raw food—although even here, problems with contamination have arisen. In addition, some veterinary experts cite health concerns related to raw food diets: specifically, inadequate calcium and phosphorous, and high fat and protein levels that aren’t appropriate for some dogs, especially puppies and dogs with compromised immune systems.

On the other hand, raw food advocates point out the benefits of this type of diet, which they say mimics the way animals eat in the wild. They also cite reduced allergies and digestive problems after switching their pets to raw food, which typically consists of muscle and organ meat, bone (whole or ground), raw egg, fruits and vegetables, and some dairy.

It’s important not to confuse raw pet food with home-made pet food. Like raw food enthusiasts, those who tout home-cooked pet food point to concerns over commercial pet food contamination, and the desire to control the quality of what they’re feeding their pets. If you choose to go this route, just be sure you’re diligent about ensuring the food provides adequate nutritional support. There are many excellent books, articles, and websites that offer detailed guidelines on ingredients, proportions, and preparation of homemade pet food.

No matter what you’re feeding your dog, be on the lookout for adverse reactions that may be related to the food. Most common are skin allergies and digestive problems like diarrhea—battles I’ve waged with my own Casey over the years. Obviously, if the problems are serious or chronic, see your veterinarian. Otherwise, you might try switching your pet to a different food or formulation, perhaps one that’s grain-free or with limited ingredients. When changing foods, never make an abrupt change: instead, mix one-quarter of the new food with three-quarters of the old food, and increase the new food a little each day.

And speaking of feeding, you’ve heard of the obesity epidemic, right? Well, turns out our dogs and cats are getting fatter too…for much the same reasons as their two-footed caretakers: too much food and too little exercise. It’s estimated that some 93 million U.S. dogs and cats are overweight or obese—that’s over 50 percent of the pet population. Why is it we chuckle at the YouTube video of a tubby tabby cat or pudgy puppy waddling along the sidewalk, as if it’s something cute and adorable?

How “cute” are diseases like arthritis, heart disease, kidney failure, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cancer? Every one of these can be linked to obesity…not to mention the fact that overweight pets die an average of 2½ years earlier than their slimmer relatives.

The solution is easy: feed your pet less, and exercise her more. First, cut down on the amount of food—chances are, it’s too much. Try replacing some of the kibble with vegetables like green beans or carrots. Avoid high-fat treats; instead, try raw carrots, dehydrated sweet potatoes, and fruits like apples and cantaloupe.

Then, get your dog outside to exercise. You don’t have to become a marathon runner just to reduce Fido’s waistline—a brisk, 20-minute walk several times a week will help both of you get in shape. Play with your dog…take him for a swim…join other dog people at the dog park…or enroll her in agility training. Anything to get your dog moving will help burn calories and stave off the life-threatening diseases and disorders that come with being overweight.

Like us, your dog should eat to live, not live to eat!

*Joan Merriam lives in Nevada County with her Golden Retriever Joey, her Maine Coon cat Indy, and the abiding spirit of her beloved Golden Retriever Casey in whose memory this column is named. You can reach Joan at* [joan@joanmerriam.com](mailto:joan@joanmerriam.com)*. And if you're looking for a Golden, be sure to check out Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue .*