



THE LABRADOR RESCUE TRUST

ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO OBESITY IN DOGS

This Veterinary Help Sheet has been very kindly written by Robert White-Adams MRCVS, who regularly writes informative columns in The Trust's 'Labradors Forever' magazine

Would you be concerned if I told you that something YOU do, every day, by choice, is making it more likely your dog will suffer from:

- Diabetes, and subsequent complications including severe vision loss due to cataract formation
- heart disease
- respiratory disease and/or heat exhaustion
- traumatic musculoskeletal injuries (such as cruciate ligament rupture)
- worsening and acceleration of the progression of the painful multi-joint arthritis that seems to affect all Labradors in their later life
- an increased risk of death or serious complications if undergoing sedation or general anaesthesia
- serious immobility, in the most severe cases necessitating a premature death via euthanasia

Of course – you would be horrified – and you would tell me that you would never do anything to expose your dog to such a horrific list of problems.

Time for a reality check – all those conditions above are can be caused by obesity - letting your dog be overweight is a serious risk to his health.

By now you've either stopped reading – or are breathing a sigh of relief because I'm no longer talking about you – your dog is not overweight – is he?!

Reality Check Number 2: More than 75% of Labradors are overweight (that's 3 out of every 4!) – and two thirds of those are so overweight that they class as clinically obese – that's two Labradors out of every four!

Take another look at that list of illnesses– these are not mere fantasies. When I read that list I get unpleasant memories of dogs I've treated that suffered from each of those conditions – all due to excessive weight – including memories of kneeling on floors having to euthanase loving Labradors that are bright, fit and alert at the front end – but because their excessive weight has progressed their arthritis they are now unable to stand up! The one that broke my heart was the handsome old boy who affectionately licked my hand the whole time I was giving the injection. The one that nearly broke my spirit was



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the lovely old girl who, unable to rise to go outside had soiled herself and her bed, and was now been eaten alive by maggots hatching from eggs laid by flies attracted to the mess! At death she weighed 65Kg – she should've weighed 30Kg – but even on her death bed her owners were busy assuring me she wasn't overweight and they certainly would never do anything to harm her.

How blind can you be?

No-one who loves their pet would ever knowingly harm them – but surely there comes a point when ignorance or refusal to see what is under your nose is no longer an excuse? It is great to see that this problem is now being taken so seriously that the RSPCA have pursued prosecutions in some extreme cases.

So let me ask you – is YOUR Labrador overweight?

“No?” – its funny – everyone always says that. Look again – is your Labrador overweight? (Remember – three out of every four are!).

To be fair - it can be hard to tell – because three out of four Labradors you see in pictures (calendars, magazines, etc.) are also overweight! So - I have 3 easy ways for you to check! Try them!

1. Weigh your dog!

Do you know your dog's weight?

If you don't know their weight, you can manage to weigh them at home on your bathroom scales – but it's tricky – however, I've never yet met a vet that would charge you for using their scales – so get yourself down there.

Most Labradors should weigh somewhere between 25-35Kg (55-75lb) depending on their height and build – your vet's staff should be able to assess this and give you an accurate idea of where in that range your dog should be!

2. Has a Veterinary Surgeon or Veterinary Nurse ever told you your dog is overweight?

If they have – accept it – your dog is overweight.

Remember – in clinic we deal with clients who pay for our services and choose to come to our clinic – we therefore try very hard not to offend them. And nothing offends someone more than telling them their dog is overweight (trust me – it's a nightmare!). For us to actually say something means the problem is very real, but chances are we tried to be diplomatic and understated the facts! As such – you can multiply what we said by at least two! When I tell a client their dog is “a little plump” we are talking at least 5Kg overweight!



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Remember – it serves us no benefit to tell you this – if anything – each time we do we risk offending and thereby losing a client! The only motivation we would have is for the well-being of your dog. So calm down, think rationally – if we have mentioned it in clinic – don't be angry at us – think about why we said it – chances are it's because your dog is overweight!

3. Put your hands on your dog

There are several simple checks you can do with your own dog.

- Place both your palms either side of your dog's chest over your dog's ribs. You should be able to feel each and every rib, and the slight depressions in-between each and every one.
- Now move to the side and look at your dog standing up – follow the line of the breastbone from the chest backwards – it should start climbing mid-chest, and then continue a slow upwards ascent through the stomach region and into the pelvis.
- Now stand behind your standing dog and look down – the chest wall (ribs) should stick out to the sides further than the stomach – there should be a visible indentation behind the last rib.
- Now, still behind the tail, crouch down and look at your dog's back from side to side – the highest point should be the spine in the middle, and your dog's sides should curve gently down and away from this point. There shouldn't be any flat region in the middle at all. (We sometimes see flat regions so wide it's like a tabletop – these dogs are severely overweight!).
- Now feel the base of your dog's tail (the bit nearest the bum!) – in fat dogs you cannot feel the bones within the tail.

If you are struggling with these tests check out this video tutorial:

http://www.petsgetslim.co.uk/site-media/video/petsgetslim_dogs.wmv

Finally, think about your dog's behaviour and character – is he slower than he used to be (or his friends are)? Does he struggle to get up? Or get into and out of the car? Does he struggle to exercise? Does he struggle to cope with heat? Does he get breathless easily? These can all be signs of obesity.

Obesity in dogs is a serious medical problem. Getting an owner to recognise and accept that their dog is fat is often the hardest battle – but is sadly it's only the first battle of the war! The next step is understanding the causes and battling the excuses. The cold hard



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fact is that in the vast majority of cases there is no medical problem causing obesity – the reality is that food is often used as a substitute for attention or as a cure for guilt, or just portioned out without thought. Remember – dogs evolved from scavengers – and for the most part the instinct to eat whatever food is available is still very strong – these dogs will ask for food even when they are not hungry in the slightest– and have often learnt through trial and error exactly what begging behaviour (soft, pleading eyes, pawing, looking sad) will get them fed.

And then the hard work begins. Making your dog lose weight is hard. And takes a long long time. The first Lab Rescue dog I took on turned up on my doorstep weighing 45Kg.... and at that time needed a rest after just walking up the front path! 18 months later he was a sprightly 30Kg loveable chunk – and used to love our long country walks and swimming whenever possible – fun he can only have dreamt of previously. Successful diets are not only possible, they are also very rewarding for owner and dog!

So – let me ask you again – is your dog overweight? If you have any doubt – get yourself to your vet. Few vets will charge for weight checks and diet advice – and most surgeries have very successful weight loss clinics run by the nursing staff. And they can also guide you through plentiful proven weight loss techniques, or help you with some of the excellent weight loss diets and medications that now exist to help you and your dog with the weight loss programme.

Remember – three out of four dogs are overweight – and are therefore at greater risk of all those horrible things I listed at the beginning. So take a good look – now is the time to act! Good Luck.

The Trust wishes to extend their most grateful thanks to Bobby White-Adams for his invaluable contribution to our rescue work.

This help sheet has been written by Robert White-Adams MRCVS. Robert has extensive experience working in mixed and small animal veterinary practice and anything to do with Labradors. He got his first and now sadly missed TLRT dog in 2001. Robert opened his own veterinary practice in 2008 which welcomes all pets, but especially Labradors.

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These Information Sheets are intended to serve as a guideline to new homes and foster homes. They are the result of many years of experience from our helpers and we hope that they provide a useful insight. Please note that these are only guidelines and The Labrador Rescue Trust, its helpers and officers make clear that it is the responsibility of each home/foster home to recognise the needs of their dog and to react to those needs. The Trust, its helpers and officers cannot be held responsible for the behaviour of any individual dog.

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