

OBESITY

Are you “loving” your Cavalier to an early death?

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Although some Cavaliers are inclined to be fussy eaters, the majority of them are very greedy, and care must be taken to keep them from overeating and putting on too much weight. Whilst some Cavaliers are more active, have a higher metabolism and don't seem to put on weight, others put on too much weight very quickly. Most adult Cavaliers only need about 180 to 220 grams (6 to 8 ounces) of food each day (including tidbits and treats). Others are very 'good doers' and need even less than this.

Obesity is a very serious problem. It affects overall health and well being and can lead to many health problems and medical conditions, some of which can be painful and expensive. Extra weight places a great deal of stress on the dog's whole body. It significantly increases the work of the heart, compresses the internal organs with fat deposits, reduces the blood flow to the lungs, places undue strain and pressure on the joints, bones and ligaments, especially those in the legs and back, and greatly reduces the dog's strength and stamina.

Dogs which are overweight are prone to diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, slipped discs, torn knee ligaments and luxating patellae, respiratory problems, heat intolerance and impaired liver function. Obesity is also a contributing factor in cancer, kidney disease, strokes and skin problems. Obese dogs are less active, tire more easily, may be uncomfortable, suffering pain and irritable, and **die younger**. Veterinarians agree that canine obesity is one of the most important health risks in dogs **and does more to limit life expectancy than all other factors**.

A lot of people ask me “How much should my dog weigh? This question is difficult to answer because the correct weight for one dog may be too much or too little for another dog. Even within a breed dogs vary in shape and size with some dogs being smaller with finer, lighter bones and others being larger and of a more solid build with thicker, heavier bones.

The quickest way to tell if your dog, small or large, young or old, is in good condition is to place your hand over the dog's back, fingers on one side, thumb on the other, and move it back and forth over the rib cage, applying only gently pressure. If you can just feel the dog's ribs, it is in good condition, but if you can't feel the dog's ribs it is overweight and you will need to immediately reduce the amount of food it is eating.

People have many excuses for fat dogs, including the old wives' tale that desexing 'makes' the dog fat! This is, of course, not true. **A dog becomes overweight when it consumes more calories than it needs for its daily energy requirements**. What is true however, is that desexing often occurs when the dog is reaching maturity and should be reducing its food intake. The owners forget to reduce the amount of food the dog is eating and consequently, it puts on weight. Mature dogs have a much lower metabolism and need much less food than growing puppies.

We need to remember that dogs are not small humans and that they have some significant differences in their physiology. Wild canines have a digestive system designed and built to handle a large amount of food at one time. When they make a kill they eat as much as they can, knowing that they might not eat again for a number of days. Our domesticated dogs still have this instinctive trait and will therefore eat as much as they can, whenever they can, and will beg for food at every opportunity. Being highly intelligent, our Cavaliers will also manipulate members of the family to give them more food and will act like they haven't been fed for days, even if another family member fed them ten minutes ago.

We also need to remember that the food we are giving our dogs is much higher in calories and quality than much of the food they would have eaten in the wild and also that they are probably not getting anywhere near as much exercise as they would have in their natural state. Remember too, that every kilogram your Cavalier puts on is approximately equivalent of you putting on 10 to 12 kilograms!

A dog's needs change according to age, exercise and circumstances. Exercise, even a ten minute walk a day, is good of course, and if your Cavalier has lots of walks, plays ball in the back yard with the kids or is active in other ways, it will be able to eat more than a dog which is leading a quieter life. However, if you are not able to give your Cavalier a lot of exercise, this needn't be a problem, - you just need to **feed it less**. Feed your Cavalier carefully, watch its weight, and remember, it is not just the main meal which adds calories, but also all those extra, high calorie tidbits and treats during the day!

Cavaliers put on weight very quickly, but take a long time to lose it, so it is much easier not let your Cavalier get too fat in the first place.

Reducing the weight of an obese Cavalier

If your Cavalier is already overweight or obese, how do you reduce that weight to a healthy level?

The answer is very easy: FEED IT LESS FOOD. Reduce the amount of food your dog is having by one third to one half, which means its new meal size will be half to two thirds of what it is used to having. Cut out the high calorie treats and, if you really need to give your Cavalier treats, replace them with carrot sticks, small slices of apple or very small pieces of bread (as big as your thumb nail).

Yes, I have heard all the owners' laments when they are told to do this – you are quite possibly thinking something similar right now!

“But it looks such a small amount and he eats it so fast it's gone in seconds. And he looks at me with such sad eyes, and he looks so hungry!” and so on and so forth!

Just remember, dogs instinctively eat as much as they can whenever they can, are always on the lookout for a chance to scrounge some extra food and are quite happy to manipulate their owner into giving them extra if they can. And also remember that, by reducing your dog's weight to a healthy level, you are increasing its chances of a longer life to spend with you.

However, if you really can't cope there are some strategies you can use to make you feel better about dieting your Cavalier and to make your dog feel as though it has had a larger meal.

- Give your Cavalier half as much food as normal but bulk the meal back to its usual size by mixing in raw, grated carrot or cooked, mashed pumpkin.
- After your Cavalier has had its half sized meal let it drink about half a cup of water flavoured with a few drops of milk or broth.
- Buy some raw lamb shanks or beef bones, scrape the meat off and include as part of your Cavalier's half size meal, remove the marrow (marrow is very fattening) and give the bone to your dog after it has scoffed its food. Chewing the bone will satisfy your Cavalier and keep it busy for a while, as well as helping to clean and strengthen its teeth.

Exercise is definitely beneficial and will help your Cavalier reduce weight more quickly, but it is not totally essential, so if you are not in a position to walk your Cavalier, don't worry. You will still be able to reduce its weight to a healthy level, although maybe not quite so quickly.

You will also need to proceed carefully with exercise if your Cavalier is very fat and not accustomed to walking, as too much exercise too quickly would put a great strain on its body and heart. Start with a short, slow walk and monitor your Cavalier's condition. Gentle panting is OK but if it starts to pant excessively or is distressed in any way you will know you have gone too far (and you may need to carry it home). Over time gradually increase the length and pace of the walk until you are able to go for a brisk half hour, or longer, walk together each day, or as often as possible.

What is the best food for a Cavalier?

There are many different brands and types of food available for dogs and each will have a loyal group of users willing to recommend it as the best, if not only food to use. Many Vets sell and recommend certain brands but, they are, of course, making money from these brands. Some brands of dog food are extremely expensive; others sell for a more reasonable price, and people have many and varied reasons for choosing and using particular brands or types of dog food.

Like many dog owners, including the Queensland Guide Dogs Association, I choose not to use processed, brand name dog foods and instead, feed my dogs a healthy diet of fresh, raw, meat and vegetables/fruit, thus avoiding all the artificial additives, chemicals, grains and cereals, fillers, preservatives, flavourings and colourings that are common in the majority of processed foods. Owners using this type of diet find that their dogs are healthier, live longer and produce feces which are much smaller and less smelly, and the diet is certainly much cheaper than other alternatives. If you are interested in this type of diet a Google search for “Cavalier Natural Raw Food Diet” will bring up many pages of information.

Individuals need to make their own decision about what to feed their Cavalier/s, based on their own experience and the advice of trusted friends and breeders. But the bottom line is that whatever food you are using, if your Cavalier is too fat, it needs to EAT LESS.

