

HOT TOPIC

Treating Strategies for Pets During Health and Weight Loss



In focus

Pet owners enjoy giving treats to their pets. They may reward their pet with a treat or may disguise medications or supplements in pill paste or human food, e.g., peanut butter or cheese. If not given judiciously, treats and snacks can contribute a significant amount of calories to a pet's daily intake.

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Why do pet owners dispense treats?

The adage “Food is love” often applies. Treats may be fed as a way to reinforce the human-animal bond, reward the pet such as for coming into the house from outside, or in training.

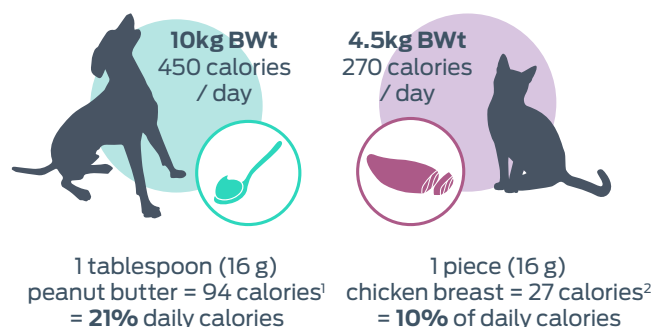
How many treats can be given?

Calories from treats and human food (table scraps) should be “counted” towards a pet's daily caloric intake and the amount of the main diet reduced to account for them. Treats should contribute no more than 10% of a pet's total daily calories to ensure the pet's diet remains complete and balanced. For pets with medical conditions, treats high in certain nutrients, such as phosphorus, may need to be limited more carefully.

How can pet owners determine how many calories treats and snacks contain?

Calorie content for commercial treats is often listed on the packaging. Calorie content and nutrient composition vary widely among treats just as they do among pet foods. Lower calorie treat options are available.

Pet owners should be made aware of how many calories even small amounts of human food can contain and how significant that can be in contributing to weight gain, particularly when considering how few calories a pet needs in a day compared to a person. Owners can find calorie information for human foods from reputable sources online.



Owners may not volunteer that they are feeding treats. Asking what the owner feeds all day from morning to bedtime is a good way to ensure nothing is missed when obtaining a diet history.

What are other options for treating pets, especially for those needing to lose weight?

Owners of pets placed on a weight loss plan may be advised not to administer treats, which may result in non-compliance with the weight loss plan. Pets used to receiving treats suddenly no longer receiving them are likely to exhibit begging behavior, which owners may find difficult to tolerate. Rather than eliminating treats, owners should be provided other options, e.g., setting aside some of the pet's daily kibble to use as treats or giving low-calorie foods, such as vegetables, e.g., green beans or zucchini.

It is important when starting overweight or obese pets on a weight loss plan to inform pet owners of exactly what diet and how much to feed, as well as how many and what kind of treats to give. Specifics must be provided to give the pet the best chance for successful weight loss. The pet's weight and body condition should be monitored regularly and adjustments made to the plan as needed.

Certain treats may be high in nutrients that need to be restricted for pets with a particular medical condition. For example, the phosphorus and protein content of treats should be considered before making treat recommendations for dogs and cats with chronic kidney disease. For these pets, websites may need to be consulted or manufacturers contacted to understand the nutrient composition of specific treats.

References

1. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service. (2022, April 28). *FoodData Central food details. Peanut butter, creamy*. <https://fdc.nal.usda.gov/food-details/2262072/nutrients>
2. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service. (2019, April 1). *FoodData Central food details. Chicken, broiler or fryers, breast, skinless, boneless, meat only, cooked, braised*. <https://fdc.nal.usda.gov/food-details/331960/nutrients>