

Foods for Show Dogs



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Did the best in show champion win thanks to its diet? Obviously, it was a good diet. Put in another way, the winner had not been fed on an inadequate food for some time. One prime concern for the owner of a show dog is keeping it healthy and making it a likely winner. For these objectives, good nutrition is one of the prerequisites.

For a pet food manufacturer, it is lucrative when its brand has a good reputation with breeders and dog show exhibitors. Thus, many manufacturers promote their brands by sponsoring dog shows and individual exhibitors. By fuelling the dog taking home the prize, a brand becomes a show-related marketing tool. Some food labels carry a brand name including the word show (see illustrations).

The success of a show dog is determined by its genetics, general health, socialisation and training. Good nutrition allows for optimum health and expression of inherited qualities. Especially relevant to show dogs are perceivable health aspects such as mobility, body condition and quality of skin and coat. Show dog owners may select a good diet on the basis of their own experiences, advice from breeders and fellow fanciers, and information from food labels and manufacturers.

In the conformation ring, show dogs must be in excellent physical condition and thus must have consumed a good diet. Owners may use homemade rations or commercial foods. Homemade diets should be carefully formulated to avoid nutritional imbalances. Nearly all complete and balanced commercially prepared canine foods meet or exceed the nutrient requirements of dogs. However, for some foods certain nutrients may be

outside the desired range. For show dogs in particular, the key nutrients relate to locomotion and quality of skin and coat. Body condition is influenced by the amount of food.

Locomotion

Young, growing Great Danes are prone to abnormal skeletal development. Too little calcium in the diet causes insufficient bone density, whereas too much impairs maturation of joint cartilage. Both

abnormalities are associated with leg deformation and painful locomotion. The optimum amount of calcium is around 0.7 percent in a dry food (with energy value of 1.5 MJ) of metabolisable energy per 100 g), which might also hold for young growing dogs of large breeds other than Great Danes. For young dogs of small and medium-sized breeds, 0.5 to 1.0 percent calcium suffices.

In adult dogs, osteoarthritis is a frequently occurring joint disorder, which causes disturbed gait. There is suggestive evidence that dietary fish oil prevents the development of joint disease through its eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) constituent. The effective amount of EPA is not known, but it could be at minimum 0.2 percent in a dry food.

Body condition

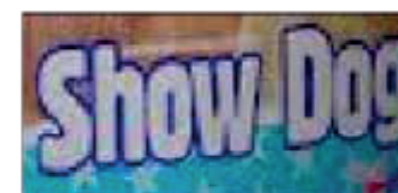
Show dogs are required to compete at their ideal weight and muscle tone according to the breed standards. For most dogs, restricted feeding is necessary to prevent overweight. Portion size has to be adjusted to the animal's body condition response.

Body condition can be assessed using a 1–9 scale with 4–5 as ideal score (Creature Companion, 2014; April: pages 62–63). A controlled study indicates that a score higher than ideal accelerates the development of osteoarthritis and shortens life span. It is noteworthy that a survey in show dogs documents that standards for specific breeds demand a body score higher than 5.

Skin and Coat

Any diet that is short in one or more essential nutrients will sooner or later cause skin disease. Complete, commercial diets normally do not induce deficiencies, but linoleic acid and zinc may be considered key nutrients.

Shortage of linoleic acid or zinc causes scaly skin and a thin, discoloured coat. There is no experimental evidence that linoleic acid and zinc further improve skin condition at intakes above the



recommended allowances. Thus, a dry food should contain at least 1 percent linoleic acid and 54 mg zinc per kg.

In individual dogs, zinc-responsive skin disease has been seen. Probably, it concerns dogs with low efficiency of zinc absorption and receiving a diet containing part of its zinc in unavailable form. For these dogs, change of diet or supplemental zinc will work.

Skin disease in dogs can be caused by adverse reactions to food components and/or environmental allergens. Diagnosis and prescription of a therapeutic diet by a veterinarian may

effectively control the disorders, but it likely is insufficient for the show circuit.

Hair Colour

Zinc deficiency generates grey hairs in a black or black-brown pigmented coat on the head, these hairs occurring earlier than scaly skin. Copper deficiency also causes graying of pigmented hair on face and head. To prevent depigmentation, a dry food should contain at least 54 mg zinc and 5 mg copper per kg.

For jet-black hair instead of reddish brown, higher intake than the allowance of the sum of two essential amino acids, phenylalanine and tyrosine, is needed. For maximum black hair colour, a dry food should contain at least 1.3 percent of phenylalanine plus tyrosine.

Stress

Some dogs may benefit from stress control during a show. There are a few foods advertised to relieve stress in dogs, but their efficacy has not been demonstrated. One of the functional ingredients, milk-derived alpha-casozepine, has been tested in dogs, but not against a placebo treatment. Curious owners may try out calming foods in order to manage anxiety.

Supplements

As mentioned, there is no experimental evidence, but anecdotal observations suggest that a dull coat and scaly skin may respond favourably to supplemental vegetable oils rich in linoleic acid. The addition of 2 grams of corn, sunflower or soybean oil to 100 g of a dry food increases the linoleic acid content by about 1 percent unit.

As a general rule, dietary supplements are not necessary when feeding a complete food. Owners using supplements should realise that excessive intake of certain constituents can be poisonous, including nutrients such as selenium and vitamins A and D.

Dr Beynen will be writing this exclusive column on dog and cat nutrition and nutrition-related items every month.