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Feeding Frequency for Dogs: What any Pack-Hunting Carnivore is Dying for...

Most people feed their dogs from a perspective of what is good for a human.

Unfortunately, the dog's digestive system is very different from that of a monkey, so such an approach causes a lot of conflict and undesired results.

Some unpleasant facts

It is known from general research that dogs, in average, need to eat an amount of raw food that is about 2% of their adult body weight in order to sustain good health and a "normal" activity level under circumstances that are not overly stressful.

The problem is that dogs are genetically programmed (and fully capable of) eating meals that are 6-8% of their body weight - after some starvation, even more...

Following a human standard for at least 2 daily meals would then mean that the dog would gain weight at a completely unreasonable rate, unless the owner keeps it constantly hungry, "forever starving" (the dog's interpretation)...

A human stomach works only 3-4 hours on a meal. Then it passes the semi-digested food to the intestine. For normal people eating three meals a day, this means that the stomach is empty no later than midnight, every day. So, it will get a solid rest until breakfast next morning.

A dog stomach that has been given a full meal will take at least 24 hours on digesting, sometimes up till 30 hours. Smaller meals take less time, but it does not take a genius to see that, unless the dog gets some days with no food at all, its stomach will virtually never get any rest...

Add to this the biological differences between primates and carnivores. When a monkey gets hungry, it reaches out for some fruits in the trees where it resides: Instant gratification! When a wolf gets hungry, it starts *hunting* - and it can be days or weeks before it gets a kill! Humans get sluggish and feel fatigue when we skip meals. If this were the case for a wolf, it would never be successful hunting...

A biologically more adequate alternative

Wolves in nature generally don't kill more than twice a month in the winter, average. That is generally 3-6 days gorging and 8-10 days fast. For most dog owners, this is a bit extreme....

My experience shows that the 6-8% meals might be representative for dogs that are mentally programmed to see themselves as "constantly starving". For dogs that learn through experience that they will indeed quite often get a fair chance to fill their stomachs, the food intake will drop down to about 4% in a matter of just a couple of weeks.

Now, 4% per meal and 2% per day means **one full meal until complete satiety every second day**, on average!

Is this manageable? Absolutely! Ask any serious ZOO, and you will learn that the big carnivores that naturally would kill prey of a size bigger than what they can eat at once will all be given a *minimum* of one complete fast day per week, most often more than that! The same goes for dogs, although the replacement cost of a dog is smaller than that of a tiger or lion.

In fact, there was a prominent example given by the Danish ZOO in Givskud, who had a lion park with a pack of lions on a significant acreage. For many years, the lions were not really doing great, health-wise. The vet bills were high, and the owner was seriously considering closing the park, blaming the weather (much colder than in Africa...). However, from a veterinarian at the ZOO in Copenhagen, Denmark, he learned about resting the stomachs of those big carnivores. He decided to stop feeding daily and instead feed the lion pack one cow to share per week! It took less than 4 months before the health improvements were significant. The lions showed that they were feeling much better: they were playful and active – a great plus for the public visitors – and on the park's financial statements.... This was back in 1987 – and the lions still thrive on only one weekly meal.

If a puppy is raised with the opportunity to fill its stomach on a fairly regular basis, it will naturally end up not wanting food until at least 24-30 hours after a full meal, once it reaches adulthood. And, unless you have conditioned it to expect food at certain times, it will suffer no harm by waiting a few more hours ("hunting time") before it actually gets another meal.

Some important observations

I have helped many hundreds of people implement the concept of feeding only 3-4 times a week. I have not one single time ever heard back from anyone about any negative or undesirable effects. Some of the results you can expect include:

- The dog's begging for food will get significantly reduced – or disappear. And food obsession will generally be reduced, as will food guard behaviors.

- The dog will become emotionally more stable and content, calmer in general, and easier to interact with, easier to train.
- The total amount of food you will need to feed will drop to 75-85% of what you used to feed, averaging over a month!
- You will no longer see undigested bone in the poop.
- The dog will most likely adjust its body weight to what it should be: fat dogs will lose weight, skinny dogs will add muscle.
- Many small health problems will disappear...

An important comment on the reduced amount of food you need to feed for the same level of activity: there is only one possible explanation, and that is that the digestion process is indeed far more effective when a big meal gets to stay in the stomach for longer time (and get more exposure to the digestions chemicals). A more effective digestion process means less need for intake of food. But it most certainly also indicates that this is a biologically much more appropriate way of feeding!

The transition

If you try to convert to this “ultimate feeding schedule” overnight, you might be in for some unpleasant surprises. The first one might be that your dog will vomit bile first time you try to skip a meal... The reason is not that it needs food at this time, but that you conditioned its stomach to produce digestive juices at this time – and with no food in the stomach, those juices are actually outright harmful for the dog. Pavlov won the Nobel price in 1905 for documenting this.

Another risk factor you should not ignore is *bloat*. The reasons for bloat are very far from understood, but there are documented examples of bloat following a gorge when the dog wasn’t used to filling its stomach. It makes sense when you understand that the dog’s stomach is very muscular, and it massages the food while digesting. A weak stomach that has never been trained to handle big amounts of volume will naturally have much lesser chance at doing it well, compared to a stomach that is strong and muscular because it is doing this kind of work regularly. I have actually never heard of any example of bloat in dogs that are feed full meals only 3-4 times a week – and if this way of feeding was indeed a risk factor for bloat, I should have known several dozen examples... This makes me see the ultimate feeding schedule as a very sure way of dramatically reducing, if not eliminating, the risk of bloat...

You have two objectives for the transition, in order of sequence:

1. Make sure that your dog has no way of predicting the specific times it will be fed; this might take you a month or two. Skipping this is not fair to the dog...
2. Make sure the muscles in the stomach get a chance to develop their strength to the maximum capacity, during a carefully planned transition period of at least 3 months, if starting from 2 daily “teaser meals”. You do this by gradually increasing both the meal size and the time between meals, keeping the timing issue and the meal size at a level of “casual sloppiness”....

Final warnings

There is *no way* you should implement this ultimate feeding schedule with a biologically inappropriate non-natural diet, like commercial kibble.

Also, some toy breeds have developed genetic liver problems that can cause diabetes-like situations when fasting. Such a dog should *not* be fed this way either.

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