

# OBESITY:

by Sandy Koch

## An all too common problem in the Alaskan Malamute

One of the most common and easily fixed health problems that we see with the Alaskan Malamute is obesity. Most people don't think of obesity as a medical problem because it is one that they have complete control over, yet it is a problem that can have serious medical consequences, drastically reduce the quality and length of your dog's life.

Being an Arctic breed, the Malamute has evolved to live and work on very little food. For this reason, the Malamute metabolism is extremely efficient and most Malamutes are easily overfed and are prone to obesity. The Malamute has evolved to be lean, and the body structure is not designed to carry excess weight - the Malamute should be an athlete.

Many caring dog owners are surprised or even offended when told that their dog is overweight, somehow viewing this information as a criticism of how they are looking after their dog. Sometimes the dog has gradually increased in weight and the owner has not even realized that their once trim Fido is now fat Fido. So, if someone mentions that your dog could do with some weight loss, remember that they only have the best interests of your dog at heart and please don't take offence.

### How can I tell if my dog is overweight?

There are quite a few tell-tale signs that your dog is overweight but the most important thing is for the owner to take their head out of the sand, acknowledge that there could be a weight problem and be objective when assessing their dog. Unfortunately, many Malamute owners think "big dog = big dish of food" without actually taking into account the condition of their dog.

Take a good look at your dog, is he really in prime condition or is he a bit on the roly-poly side? Is your dog a lean, well-muscled athlete who is full of vigour or more your couch potato that gets puffed out walking around the block?

Carrying out the following tests on your dog can help you decide.

#### **Weigh your dog:**

The AKC Alaskan Malamute Breed Standard dictates that the "desirable freighting size" is for males 25 inches high at the shoulder and around 39 kg, for females 23 inches high at the shoulder and around 34 kg. If your dog is around those heights then he or she should also be around those weights. Of course, if your Malamute is taller or shorter the weight will vary accordingly, but you really wouldn't expect a healthy Malamute to weigh that much more than the breed standard indicates.

We are constantly dismayed by the number of Malamute owners who seem proud to announce that their dog is 60 or 70 kg, as if this fact is expected to impress. In our experience we haven't yet seen a dog that weighs much more than around 55kg that doesn't have some degree of weight problem.

#### **Feel the Ribs:**

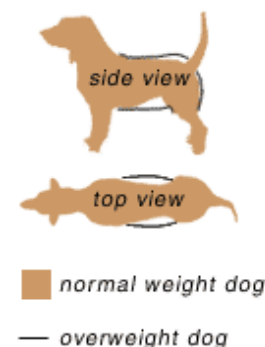
One of the most obvious signs of a dog that is seriously overweight is that you cannot distinctly feel the ribs. Run your fingertips up and down your dog's ribs, if you can feel every rib distinctly under the skin, with maybe a very slight covering of flesh, then your dog is probably around the correct weight. If you can feel the ribs but they are not distinct, and there is a fair bit of skin and fat between your fingertips and the ribs, then the problem is probably not too serious but you do need to get rid of that excess fat.

If the ribs are very indistinct under a thick layer of fat, or even worse, if you can't feel the ribs at all, your dog is seriously overweight and you need to take some drastic action to get some weight off before your dog suffers secondary health problems.

To the other extreme, if the ribs are visible or you can feel them sticking out with just a very thin layer of skin covering them, perhaps your dog is too lean and needs a bit extra in the dinner bowl.

#### **Look at the tuck:**

Stand back and take an objective look at your dog from the side. The Malamute should have a distinct "tuck", in other words there should be an obvious narrowing of the dog behind the rib cage in the loin. If your dog isn't significantly narrower in the loin area then there is a good chance that he or she is a bit too porky.



Another way to view the "tuck" is from above. Looking down on your dog again you should see a definite waist where the body narrows behind the ribcage at the loin. If your dog looks straight from ribs to hips from above and there is no apparent waist, then your dog is carrying too much fat.

#### **Feel your dog all over:**

You should only be able to feel a thin layer of flesh over the bony parts of your dog such as the spine, hips and shoulders. If you can feel a significant fat layer or can't feel these bones distinctly, then your dog has a serious weight problem.

#### **Does your dog cope well with exercise?**

When you take your dog for a walk does he waddle rather than stride out? Can you see the muscles working under his skin or does his fat wobble from side to side? Will he take as much exercise as you can dish out or does he get puffed out just strolling around the block? Take a good look next time you go for a walk and be realistic in assessing your dog's physical condition and fitness.

#### **Why does my dog eat more than it needs?**

The survival instinct of the Alaskan Malamute dictates that any meal could be its last for quite some time, and feeding times are anticipated with much relish - whatever you put in the bowl will never be enough in the eyes of the Malamute. These instincts have been with the breed and ensured its survival for thousands of years, so the fact that they are now a backyard pet in sunny Australia has had no impact at all on their instinct to eat all they can while they can. However, Malamute owners must resist the temptation to give in to the hungry look of the Malamute, or they'll end up with a very overweight and unhealthy dog, not to mention a huge food bill.

Sometimes you'll find your Malamute eating things that you might well not consider to be food, but for an arctic breed anything that may be vaguely nutritious is worthy of eating. This might explain why your Malamute likes to dine on plants from your garden, sticks, timber fences and kennels, any leather goods, dirt, not to mention animal droppings, including of course their own or those of their kennel mates.

Most people are suitably disgusted by this behaviour (which in scientific terms is known as "coprophagia") yet for an arctic breed where survival might depend on it the act of "recycling" simply indicates that your dog has a very well-honed arctic survival instinct. Of course, this is not highly desirable when the Malamute is a family pet that likes to give you a big lick on the face, not to mention the fact that eating their own or other dogs' faeces can aid the spread of parasites.

Don't be alarmed – the Malamutes desire to supplement their diet doesn't necessarily mean that you are underfeeding your Malamute or that his diet is deficient in any way.

### So how much should I be feeding my Malamute?

The Alaskan Malamute as an arctic breed has had to survive over thousands of years being able to hunt and work on a minimal diet. To cope with the lack of available food, the Malamute has developed an extremely efficient and effective digestive system which enables them to draw every available ounce of nutrition and energy out of whatever it eats.

As a general rule of thumb the Malamute will eat about the same amount as you would expect to feed a medium sized dog. Having said that, the metabolism of each dog is different and our Malamutes, even litter-mates, get quite different amounts of food depending on their individual metabolisms. A dog's metabolic rate is dictated to some extent by how active your dog is, the size and age of your dog, and how much exercise he gets, so there are no hard and fast rules about how much to feed.

Often new Malamute owners make the mistake of religiously feeding what the breeder has told them, what Joe Bloggs down the road feeds his Malamute, or what is listed on the packet of dog food. This might work for your dog if you are lucky, but it well might not. The trick is to be objective and diligent in assessing your dog's condition and adjusting the diet accordingly.

We often hear people say that their Malamute is overweight because he doesn't get walked as much as he should – NOT TRUE! If you exercise your dog it will help him lose weight, however the primary factor in weight-control is how much food your dog is getting. Exercise is a good adjunct to sensible diet, but exercise alone will often not make a great deal of difference.

As with people, a dog is overweight simply because his calorie intake exceeds the number of calories he burns up, so if he isn't burning up many calories with exercise then simply reduce the calorie intake. You may find you are giving your Malamute a very meagre looking portion, but if that's all he needs to maintain good health then don't be tempted to increase the volume.

For dogs that do put on weight easily, there are many dog food options available that are specifically designed to provide the necessary nutrients without so many calories.

The bottom line is that your dog doesn't do the shopping and serve his own dinner, you do. It is up to you to give him just what he needs to keep him healthy and no more.

### But he still looks hungry!

It is always very tempting to give your Malamute just a bit extra because Fido is still looking at you with those pleading, hungry eyes when the dinner bowl is empty. Think of the welfare of your dog, be strong and don't give in!

If you feel that you need to feed your dog a larger quantity but don't want him to gain weight, then try padding his meal out with low calorie / high fibre foods. Replace some of the higher energy portion of his diet, such as dry foods and meats, with filler foods such as vegetables, rice, pasta, barley or oats. These foods will fill your dog up without adding nearly as many calories as an equal quantity of other dog foods.

Many of the good quality brands of dry dog food offer a lower calorie alternative for older dogs or dogs that put on weight easily, so try substituting your normal dry food with a "lite" formula.



One of the downfalls in controlling the diet is often the temptation to feed your dog a snack every now and then – fine if this is properly monitored but if every member of the family is doing it then it will add up to quite a lot of extra calories your dog is ingesting per day. If everyone in the family enjoys giving the dog a treat that's fine, just make sure it is a low-calorie snack. You will find that your Malamute will enjoy a small bone or a carrot just as much as a high calorie biscuit or doggy treat from the supermarket, and the former is obviously much better for your dog than the latter.

The same applies if you are using food to train your dog. Malamutes respond very well and

learn quickly when food is offered as a reward, so all you need to do is replace the traditional supermarket treats with healthier fruit or veggie treats such as pieces of carrot or apple.

Another good weight-control tip is not to give your dog leftovers if they are really better off in the rubbish bin. Sugary, fatty, spicy or salty foods really aren't terribly good for your dog and he is much better off without them, so please think carefully before adding "human" foods to your dog's dinner bowl.

Last but not least, do not use food as a substitute for attention and as a means to ease your guilt!

### Does it really matter if my dog is overweight?

The answer is of course YES! This breed has developed and survived for thousands of years in an environment where food is scarce, and the structure and function of the Malamute dictates that this is a breed that should be lean. Any excess weight on the dog, and especially on growing puppies, can lead to other quite serious health problems affecting the heart, joints, kidneys, lungs and liver and increases the risk of the following:

- Hip dysplasia & joint problems
- Heart disease and high blood pressure
- Respiratory problems
- Decreased stamina
- Heat intolerance
- Increased surgical risk
- Digestive problems
- Reduced immune and liver function
- Coat & skin problems
- Increased risk of cancer
- Decreased quality of life

*Other factors causing obesity:* Most cases of obesity in Malamutes can be attributed to the owner being overgenerous with the amount they are feeding the dog. However, there are also medical conditions that can lead to obesity and many of these can be treated. If your Malamute has an unexplained weight gain or does not respond to "dieting" then take him or her to a vet to make sure there is not an underlying medical cause.

### Obesity is a serious problem

You don't need to be a veterinarian to realize that the vast number of problems and conditions that are exacerbated by obesity will mean that an overweight dog has a decreased ability to lead and happy and healthy life. Obese dogs are generally more uncomfortable, prone to more medical problems, are less active and are much more likely to have a reduced lifespan.

So do your dog a favour and keep him trim.

**Remember - a fit, healthy and lean Malamute is a happy Malamute!**

References: *Dog Owners' Guide:* <http://www.canismajor.com/dog/obese.html>

*Is Your Dog Overweight... What Should You Do?* <http://www.dogs-and-diets.com/html/obesity.html>

*Is your dog overweight?* <http://www.pet-foods.co.uk/page16.html>