

Athlete or Couch Potato? Greyhounds and Obesity



Greyhound at pet weight. Backbone and last three ribs still visible.

Greyhounds are the ultimate canine athletes. They can run short distances at up to 45 mph. The Greyhound in proper athletic condition has little to no body fat, probably in the range of three to five percent. In comparison, the average American's body fat is in the range of 17 percent to 25 percent. These finely tuned Greyhound athletes are the ultimate in power and grace. But upon adoption, everything changes. The Greyhound leaves the athletic field and spends a lifetime on the couch.

We've all heard the comment that "a Greyhound is a 45 mph couch potato." While life on the couch is wonderful, your Greyhound does not need to spend his retirement acquiring body fat.

A Greyhound at ideal weight will show a graceful curve; an obese Greyhound will show a straight line...If you look at your Greyhound from behind, from left to right, his back should have a nice arch or curve to it. If his back looks flat, as if you could balance a serving tray on him, then he has a problem.

How do you tell if your Greyhound is fat? It is difficult to evaluate your Greyhound's weight on a daily or weekly basis, since changes can be subtle. And most homes do not have a "walk-on" scale like those found at a veterinary clinic. The method of weighing yourself, picking up your Greyhound, stepping back on the scale, weighing the combination, then subtracting the difference may be useful, but it is neither accurate nor easy for many people.

So what's an owner to do? For starters, watch for changes in your dog's body shape. The Greyhound's body undergoes some changes as he gains weight. For example, he will begin to lose his "tuck-up." This is the area between the end of his ribs and his thighs. A Greyhound at ideal weight will show a graceful curve; an obese Greyhound will show a straight line. He will also lose roundness to his back. If you look at your Greyhound from behind, from left to right, his back should have a nice arch or curve to it. If his back looks flat, as if you could balance a serving tray on him, then he has a problem. Finally, how many ribs can you feel? If you cannot see or feel the last two to three ribs easily, then your Greyhound is probably overweight.



Obese Greyhound. The back appears flat, and no waistline or ribs are evident.

Comparison to other Greyhounds can be helpful in maintaining ideal weight, as can pictures. As you complete your adoption, ask your adoption group if your Greyhound is too skinny, too fat, or just right. Take a few photographs of your Greyhound soon after you bring him home. You now have a basis for comparison. Once a month, critically evaluate his weight. If you have concerns, ask your veterinarian for permission to use the scale at the clinic. In my office, the scale is in the waiting room so owners can weigh their pets without an appointment. This will allow you to track and document his weight.

If your Greyhound has adopted the eating and exercise habits of mainstream America,



Frosting, adopted by Marjorie Conn from Greyhound Friends of Hopkinton, Mass.

how can you help him lose weight? Everyone knows the benefits of regular exercise, of course. But adjusting your Greyhound's food intake is important, too.

First, buy a measuring cup. Very few Greyhounds can be free fed. Measure the food at every meal. The usual recommendation is 1 cup of food daily per 15 to 20 pounds of body weight. The recommended amount may be divided into two meals daily and depends on the quality of food being fed. These recommendations give you a baseline and may vary with your Greyhound's level of activity.

Second, feed your Greyhound the amount of food for his ideal weight. This means if he is 20 pounds heavier than his ideal weight of 60 pounds, feed him 3 cups daily. Weigh him every other week. If he does not lose weight, then decrease the amount of food to 2 and-a-half cups daily.

Third, if he does not lose weight after you've cut back on his food, have his thyroid hormone levels tested for hypothyroidism.

Fourth, document every treat and snack. Your Greyhound probably eats more than you think.

Finally, if the above methods fail, then switch to a reducing diet food. These contain fewer calories but more "bulk" to make your pet feel full.

What is a Greyhound's ideal weight? Is it the same as the racing weight? I feel that the Greyhound's racing weight is a little light by 3 to 5 percent. This means a 60-pound racing Greyhound should weigh about 63 pounds. A 3 to 5 percent gain comes easily in the first few weeks of life on the couch, but can be easily surpassed in the next few weeks.

Finally, will obesity cause other problems for your Greyhound? The answer is yes. Tendon, ligament, and joint problems are common. Specifically, obese Greyhounds tend to experience more arthritis, pulled tendons, and strained ligaments. The extra weight causes undue stress on the joints and tendons, leading to lameness and arthritis.

In addition, the heart has to work harder to push the blood through the body. This promotes hypertension, which can lead to kidney and/or heart failure. Finally, obesity may limit treatment options. I have treated two cases of obese Greyhounds (20 to 30 percent over their ideal weight) for whom the diagnosis was osteosarcoma. In dogs at an ideal weight, a limb-sparing procedure or amputation might be appropriate. Because these Greyhounds were so overweight, euthanasia was the only option.

The Greyhound is the ultimate canine athlete. He has also become the typical American. He has achieved obesity by following our lead. Evaluate your Greyhound's weight monthly. His health and longevity depend on your care. ■

Dr. Jim Bader is a CG regular contributor.