

# Feeding Times and Frequency for Your Dog | VCA Animal Hospital | VCA Animal Hospitals

**I've heard conflicting advice about feeding my dog - once a day, twice a day, just keep the bowl filled. I'm confused! What is a good feeding schedule?**

Feeding your dog does not have to be mysterious. By recognizing a few key concepts and attributes of dogs we can create a very reasonable feeding plan for them.

**Dogs are creatures of habit.** We can use this fact to our advantage by creating a regular feeding schedule and sticking to it.



A regular feeding schedule helps with house training puppies, as well as adult rescue dogs who have not been taught household manners. Puppies generally need to relieve themselves within 10 to 15 minutes of eating a meal. By linking a 'potty stop' with a meal we not only allow ourselves to predict when the pup needs a trip outside, we allow the puppy to learn to associate the urges to urinate and defecate with being in the appropriate location. This is a very important step in the house-training process.

Feeding an adult dog at regular times provides the security and predictability of a routine. Meals become a cornerstone event of the day around which other activities are added. A feeding routine helps your dog cope when there are changes in the household (e.g., a child moves away to college, a new baby arrives, or a vacation during which a house-sitter is in charge).

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A feeding routine makes a necessary food change easier. When your dog is used to eating at the same times each day, his body becomes conditioned to expect food at those times. Hunger can be a great motivator! If the stage is set for increased hunger followed by meals at regular times, then transitioning to a new food will often be seamless and straightforward.

**Dogs have a simple stomach anatomy, just like humans.** Because dogs have a simple stomach structure, once the stomach is filled with food, it will empty within a few hours as food moves into the small intestine. After 8 to 10 hours, an empty stomach begins to send signals to the brain stimulating a hunger response. For this reason, at least two meals per day are best for your dog. Imagine if you only got to eat breakfast each day, and that was it! Regular, routine feeding times allow your dog's body to be prepared for the food it will receive. It is not recommended to keep the bowl filled and allow grazing.

**A break in eating habits can be a warning sign of illness.** When dogs eat on a regular schedule, that habit becomes strong. It is easy to see at a glance if all the food from a meal is consumed. If food is left, whether all or part of a meal, that is an important signal that something is wrong, and it is time to schedule a veterinary appointment.

**I was told that puppies should eat all they want; 3 or 4 times per day. Is that true?**

Feeding a puppy all it can eat at one time is called '*ad libitum*' or 'free choice' feeding. This is **not recommended** as it can create juvenile obesity, binge eaters, as well as set the stage for some orthopedic problems and diabetes. Over-eating at any one meal can also cause stomach discomfort and bloating causing slower digestion. Dogs are acknowledged to have a genetically determined "set point" for their adult size. Slower, controlled growth in puppies optimizes body condition in adulthood.

**How many meals should my dog eat each day?**

The number of meals a dog eats per day depends completely on the family schedule. Dogs should eat **at least** two meals each day, about 12 hours apart. But a breakfast, lunch, and dinner schedule is an equally great option. If more than 12 hours elapses between meals, the stomach can become hyperacidic causing nausea.

**My dog doesn't finish her meal all at once. I think she prefers to graze. What should I do?**

Some dogs really can regulate their food intake fairly well. It is still a good idea to create the expectation of mealtimes. This will help make it easier if another pet is added to your family at some point in the future. For grazers, simply measure out the entire day's portion of food in the morning and offer the bowl several times throughout the day. Choose regular times in order to create the routine we know is helpful. The important thing is to use a measured portion, either with a measuring cup or a kitchen scale, for the day.

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Another consideration is the use of food toys. Many options exist from rolling food toys that just drop out a kibble of food intermittently to stationary food toys that require the dog to work for the food. See the handout "Feeding the Mind and Body: Interactive Feeders for Dogs and Cats" for more information on these types of feeders. Food toys are almost as entertaining for the people in your family as they are for your dog!

Your veterinarian remains the best source of nutritional guidance for your dog, answering important questions like what to feed, how much to feed, and how frequently to feed. Feeding time can be an important bonding time. Creating routine and regular feeding times builds fun into everyday activities.