

SHINE

# Dog Nutrition

## Maintaining a healthy weight for emotional wellness

Being overweight or underweight will significantly affect how a dog feels, as how they look, behave, how active they are and how physically healthy they are.



## Maintaining a healthy weight for emotional wellness

Obesity in dogs is associated with several health and welfare risks including arthritis, breathing problems, heart disease, diabetes and certain types of cancer. Obese dogs may also have shortened life spans and reduced quality of life; a recent study highlighted that an overweight body condition was associated with a shorter life span in all 12 breeds studied<sup>1</sup>.

Being overweight can restrict normal behaviours and reduce the ability to exercise, play or explore their environment. Pain and discomfort from associated health conditions can also negatively influence behaviour and affect how a dog interacts with other dogs and people. Over time this can lead to reduced or negative socialisation experiences and inadequate mental stimulation which will/might eventually negatively impact your dog's emotional wellbeing (see [Health](#)).

More information, including a video demonstrating how to body condition score your dog, can be found [here](#)



<sup>1</sup>Salt, C, Morris, PJ, Wilson, D, et al., 2019, Association between life span and body condition in neutered client-owned dogs, Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine, Vol 33(11), pp. 88-99





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## **Understanding a healthy bodyweight**

Calorie control and appropriate exercise are the most important factors influencing the maintenance of a healthy body weight. However, it's not always easy to recognise that your dog is overweight. Weight can vary greatly, even between individuals of the same breed, and it's important to understand what a healthy bodyweight looks like for both adult dogs and growing puppies. A simple method to determine if your adult dog is at a healthy weight is by checking their body condition score. This uses a quick visual assessment of your dog to determine where they fit on a scale from extremely underweight to obese. A dog with a healthy body condition score will have a visible waist and you should be able to feel their ribs easily without applying pressure. When you have identified that your dog is at a healthy body condition score, their current weight can then be used to help monitor and maintain a healthy body weight.

More information, including a video demonstrating how to body condition score your dog, can be found [here](#).

To make sure your puppy is on track to maturing into their healthy adult weight, use the [WALTHAM™ Puppy Growth Charts](#).



## Important factors to consider

Feeding home-prepared diets or table scraps has also been linked to an increased risk of pet obesity<sup>2</sup>. This may be partly because there is no feeding guide to follow to ensure the correct amount is being fed. Your lifestyle as a dog owner also plays an important role, with more time spent at home being a common factor associated with an overweight pet, as well as a general lack of physical activity in the household.

Regular body condition scoring, weight checks, exercise, and appropriate quantity and quality of nutrition are key to [maintaining a healthy bodyweight](#).

Any concerns about a pet's body weight or condition should be discussed with your veterinarian.



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## **Obesity – a growing problem**

Obesity is the most common nutritional disorder seen in dogs today. Recently, it has been estimated that over 50% of dogs exceed their ideal weight<sup>3</sup>. Obesity is a far more common problem than being underweight for dogs. Dogs are defined as overweight if their body weight is 15% above ideal and obese if more than 30% above their ideal weight.

<sup>3</sup>Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, 2019, 2018 Pet Obesity Survey Results: U.S. Pet Obesity Rates Plateau and Nutritional Confusion Grows, Available at: <https://petobesityprevention.org/2018>, Accessed 30 December 2021



## Tailoring diet to your dog's individual needs

It's also important to consider your dog's lifestyle when choosing a diet. In particular, how active they are will affect the ideal quantity and type of their food as well as the best timing of their feeding. Working dogs or highly active dogs will require more energy from their food than dogs that lead a more sedentary lifestyle. They may also require more frequent meals or food on the go. More detailed information on the nutritional requirements of working dogs can be found [here](#).

Inadequate energy intake will be detrimental to your dog's health and performance, ultimately leading to weight loss and nutrient deficiency. On the other hand, excess energy intake will cause weight gain, leading to obesity and compromised health. If you aren't sure how active your dog is, there are now activity trackers, available specifically for dogs – find out more [here](#).

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## It all plays a part

Other factors, such as neuter status will also affect dietary needs. While it's not completely proven that neutering makes dogs fat, neutered dogs do need fewer calories. To learn more about meeting your dog's unique needs to optimise emotional wellbeing, see [Individuality](#).

Without the right diet, your dog may not only become physically ill, but will live a less-satisfying, lower quality of life overall. And because your dog's needs will change during their lifetime, so too must their diet change to maximise their wellbeing.





## Signs that your dog's diet may need reassessing include:<sup>4</sup>

- Progression to the next life stage e.g., from adult to senior
- Change in lifestyle e.g., more or less exercise
- Neutering status
- Pregnancy or lactation
- Change in weight
- Lack of energy
- Change in demeanour or behaviour
- Change in toileting habits or poor stool quality
- Poor coat or change in texture/volume
- Change in feeding habits or preferences
- Signs of illness or discomfort



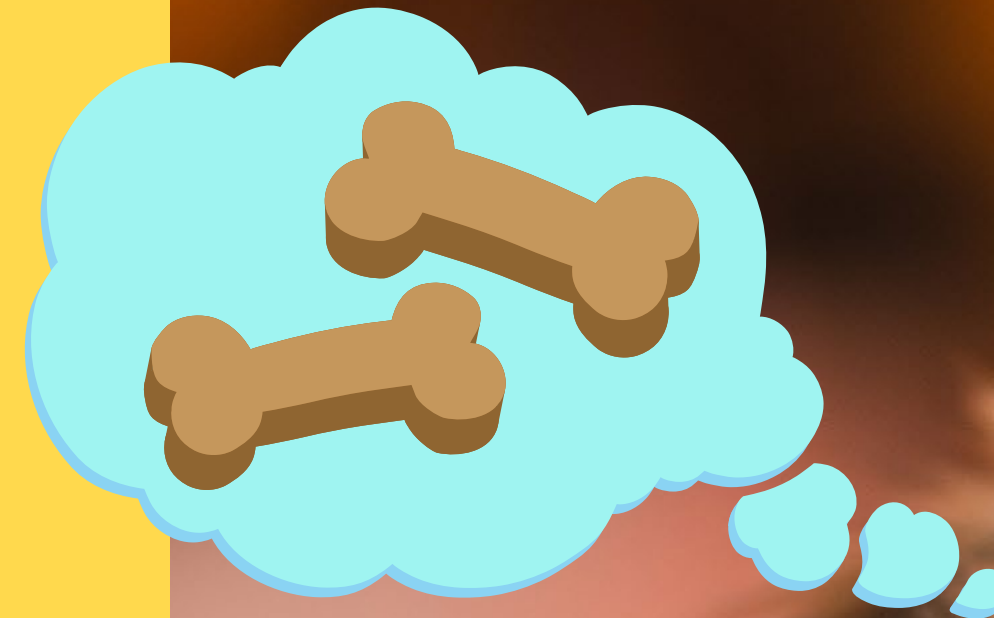


## Maintaining a healthy feeding routine

In many cases, our dog's feeding routine is built around convenience and the ability to fit in with our own busy lifestyles. While this isn't necessarily a bad thing, it's important to be aware of the impact our imposed feeding routines may have on your dog's physical and emotional health.

For example, allowing your dog to feed freely (ad libitum) may encourage over-eating in some dogs and has been associated with weight gain, compared to feeding scheduled meals<sup>5</sup>. Many pet owners choose to divide their dog's daily food allowance into more than one meal. While this in itself does not cause weight gain, studies have shown that dogs fed more than once a day are more likely to be offered excess calories which can result in weight gain. Carefully weighing out your dog's portions at mealtimes and feeding a controlled amount of treats can help combat this problem.

If your dog still seems to be hungry at certain times of day, you may need to reconsider your feeding schedule to suit their individual requirements. However, it's important to remember that signs of excessive hunger or thirst should always be discussed with a veterinarian, as they can indicate an underlying health problem, such as diabetes.



<sup>5</sup>German, AJ, 2006, The Growing Problem of Obesity in Dogs and Cats, The Journal of Nutrition, Vol 136(7), pp. 1940S-1946S





## Getting the measurements right

Even if your dog likes to graze, it is still a good idea to create the expectation of mealtimes by offering their measured amount of food at specific times throughout the day. This can make it easier to monitor feeding times. Making mealtimes more predictable will ensure your dog is more relaxed and comfortable. Moreover, knowing how much your dog has eaten and when, is important. Having regular mealtimes can also help manage feeding of multiple pets.

It's extremely important that your dog feels safe and secure when eating. **Resource guarding** is a behavioural issue in which a dog begins to guard items of high importance or 'value' to them, like their food bowl or a favourite toy. This is completely normal and natural canine behaviour and shouldn't be punished. However, it is important to recognise it may pose a risk to other pets and family members, so it is important to teach your dog to be relaxed at mealtimes by showing them that their food won't be taken away.

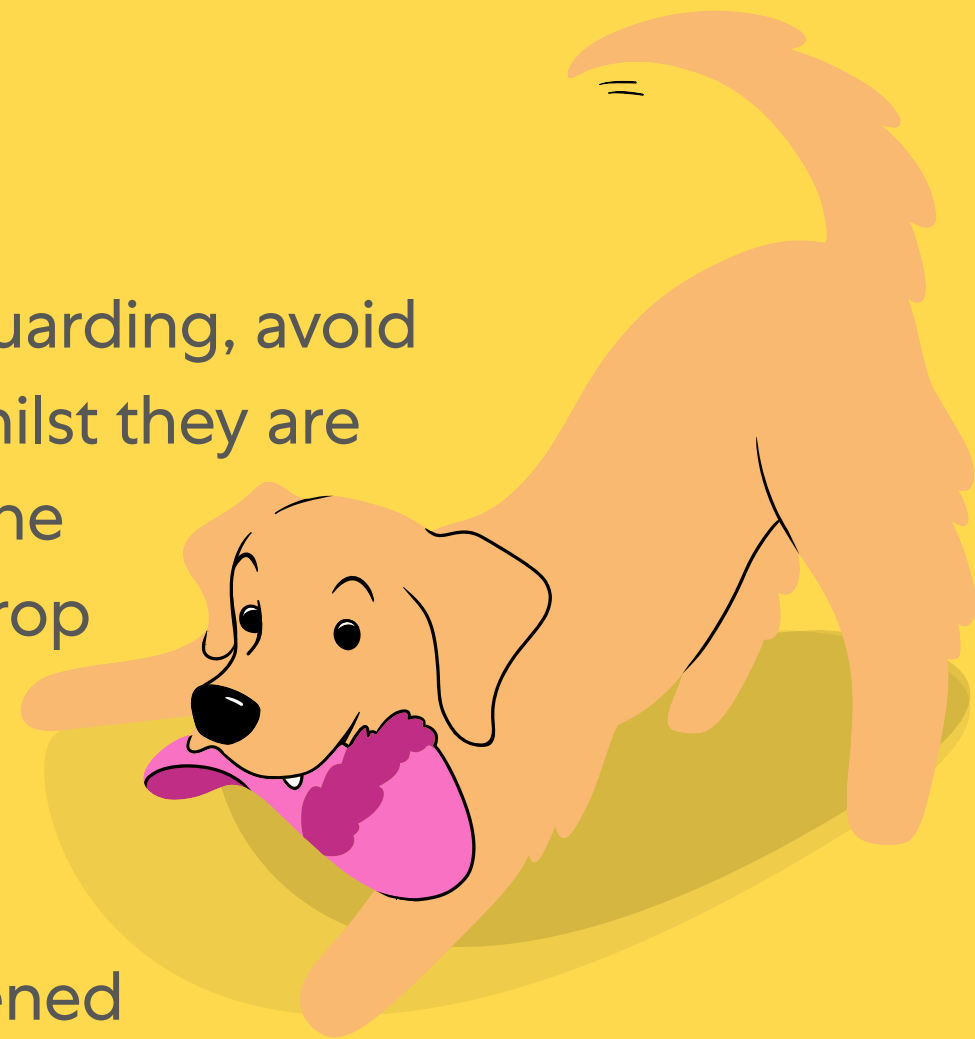





## Avoid the stress

To help prevent issues with resource guarding, avoid taking away your dog's food or toys whilst they are eating or chewing. Additionally, from the time you acquire your dog, regularly drop highly desirable food items in their bowl or close to them while they are eating as you pass at a safe distance. This will help your dog feel less threatened by your presence and over time begin to associate your approach with the delivery of tasty items. If your dog thinks their food might be taken away from them when you approach, they're more likely to try and protect it. You can also try feeding your dog in a separate room, away from other animals or people that might interfere. The aim is to make your dog feel less stressed whilst eating to improve their meal experience and overall emotional wellbeing.

If not managed appropriately, resource guarding can become a serious behavioural problem, so it's important to speak to a qualified pet behaviourist if you're concerned.







**How you feed your dog matters, as well as what you feed and when**

## Food as enrichment

How you feed your dog matters, as well as what you feed and when. Varying your dog's food is another excellent way to provide enrichment, as there are plenty of food-associated variables such as the food's formulation (wet or dry); the food's properties (taste, smell, temperature and texture) as well as how it is presented or delivered.

Any modification to your dog's environment that encourages physical activity and the expression of natural behaviours (such as hunting or foraging) is considered enrichment. These activities are crucial to your dog's mental and emotional wellbeing. Enriched feeding provides mental stimulation and a sense of satisfaction when the food is found.

By encouraging your dog to hunt or forage for their food, you're tapping into their 'wild side' and allowing them to express their natural behaviour which is key for optimal emotional wellbeing (see [Environment](#)).

Consider encouraging your dogs to eat their meals (or at least a portion of their meal) via enriched feeding methods, rather than from a traditional dog bowl where possible (exceptions may include dogs with health conditions such as arthritis).





## Making dinner time fun

By making your dog work for their food, you can prolong their mealtime and encourage physical exercise at the same time. This can be beneficial for weight management and may even help prevent medical conditions linked to eating too quickly, such as bloat or GDV (Gastric Dilatation-Volvulus). Puzzle toys that your dog must manipulate to gain access to their food are excellent for this purpose and also provide mental stimulation. The Kong, The Buster FoodCube, and the Tug-a-Jug, are just a few examples. You can also stuff food in toys or hide food

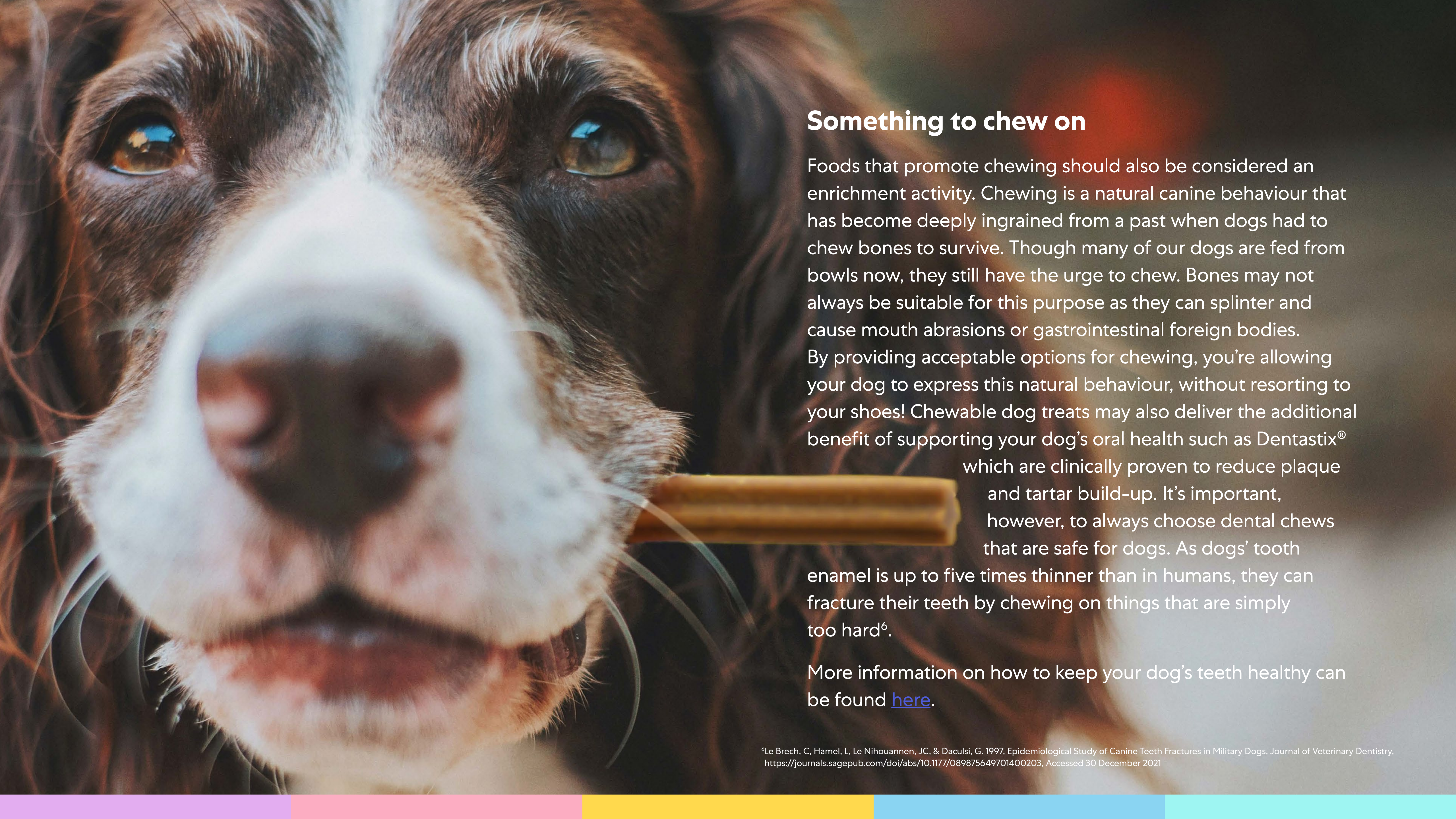
around the home for 'hunt-and-search' games or place some in snuffle mats for them to forage. Leaving your dog with a puzzle toy or another form of enriched feeding can also help reduce separation-related behaviours, by keeping your dog comforted and entertained whilst you're away (see [Socialisation](#)). Providing puzzle toys or slow-dispense feeders can also help promote agency, as your dog is able to access their food or treats as they choose.

So, using food can incorporate many types of enrichment, such as sensory experiences and cognitive stimulation.

For more information on the different types of enrichment, see [Health](#), and [Environment](#).

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## Something to chew on

Foods that promote chewing should also be considered an enrichment activity. Chewing is a natural canine behaviour that has become deeply ingrained from a past when dogs had to chew bones to survive. Though many of our dogs are fed from bowls now, they still have the urge to chew. Bones may not always be suitable for this purpose as they can splinter and cause mouth abrasions or gastrointestinal foreign bodies. By providing acceptable options for chewing, you're allowing your dog to express this natural behaviour, without resorting to your shoes! Chewable dog treats may also deliver the additional benefit of supporting your dog's oral health such as Dentastix®

which are clinically proven to reduce plaque and tartar build-up. It's important, however, to always choose dental chews that are safe for dogs. As dogs' tooth enamel is up to five times thinner than in humans, they can fracture their teeth by chewing on things that are simply too hard<sup>6</sup>.

More information on how to keep your dog's teeth healthy can be found [here](#).

<sup>6</sup>Le Brech, C, Hamel, L, Le Nihouannen, JC, & Daculsi, G. 1997, Epidemiological Study of Canine Teeth Fractures in Military Dogs, Journal of Veterinary Dentistry, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/089875649701400203>, Accessed 30 December 2021



## Get rewarded

Food is also often used as a successful training aid and to reward desirable behaviour. Training is an excellent source of mental stimulation and helps strengthen the unique bond between a dog and their owner. Studies have shown that reward-based training (positive reinforcement) is less stressful for dogs and creates an improved mental state compared to punishment-based or negative reinforcement training. They are also more likely to pick up a new skill more quickly this way<sup>7</sup>.

When using food for enrichment activities, try to use a portion of your dog's daily main meal food allowance rather than too many treats. The energy consumption from treats contributes to a pet's daily energy intake and therefore must be accounted for within the daily calorie intake. Remember as well that snacks and treats don't deliver all of the essential nutrients your dog requires.

Learn more about nutrition and emotional wellbeing for your pets at [shine.waltham.com](https://www.shine.waltham.com)

<sup>7</sup>Vieira de Castro, AC, Fuchs, D, Morello, GM, et al., 2020, Does training method matter? Evidence for the negative impact of aversive-based methods on companion dog welfare, PLOS ONE, doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225023, Accessed 02 January 2022

