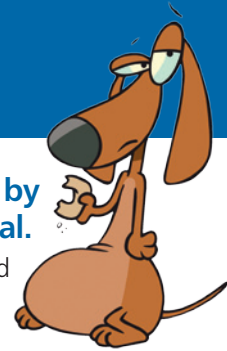


Vet's Corner – Feeding the retired hound



Most greyhounds retire from racing at around 4-5 years old, and if well looked after by their adoptive 'parents', can expect to live 14 or 15 years, all other things being equal.

The rate at which dogs age is dependent on bodyweight and size, thus large breeds age relatively quickly while smaller breeds age more slowly. As an example, for most breeds, at two years old they are the equivalent of a twenty year old human, but after this the rate of ageing varies quite considerably. For smaller breeds, one year of their life will be equal to about four human years while for larger breeds, eg greyhounds, one year for them will equal about seven human years.

Aging causes changes in the body of all creatures, including greyhounds, but with improvements in nutrition and medical care, greyhounds are living longer. With this is an increase in age-related degenerative conditions affecting many body organs and systems including the heart, muscles and bones, vision, hearing, kidney and even the brain.

During their racing career greyhounds are maintained at an optimum racing weight which means they are thin, with minimal body fat, but very athletic. Their diets are strictly controlled to maintain body weight within 1.5 kg of their optimum racing weight. Once retired, their bodyweight should increase by between two to four kilograms. Ribs should not be seen but should be easily felt by running the hand along the side of the ribcage. This is an easy but reliable way of assessing whether a pet is overweight, underweight or just right.

Being overweight or obese can precipitate or worsen the two major degenerative diseases of retired greyhounds – heart disease and arthritis. An interesting nutritional study

done on Labrador Retrievers in the USA, found that being thin over a lifetime resulted in an extended lifespan, 13 years versus 11.2 years or the equivalent of nearly 14 years in human terms. Obesity in a retired greyhound would be defined as a 20-25% increase in weight over its ideal weight.

While being overweight is certainly unhealthy, being grossly underweight is equally undesirable. Greyhounds are very thin-skinned, ie their skin is less than half the thickness of most other breeds. Combine this with low or zero body fat and the underweight greyhound will be very susceptible to cold. In an attempt to stay warm by shivering the underweight greyhound will burn up muscle tissue rather than fat, making it even more underweight. With thin greyhounds kept in cold conditions and underfed, their calorie requirements can lose up to a quarter of their body mass just trying to stay warm. Unless put into a warm environment and their calorie intake increased, such dogs can – and will – go into hypothermic shock and die.

In obese animals, fat cells produce inflammatory products called cytokines that are believed to play a major role in the onset of heart disease, osteoarthritis and diabetes mellitus. With an obese greyhound, either food needs to be reduced or they must go on to one of the special weight reducing diets produced by one of the commercial dog food companies. These diets are low in fat and high in good quality protein. Also, regular exercise consisting of long walks is also valuable in any weight loss program. ■

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