

## Norwich Terriers, 11-15

### Title: Extra Calories

After retiring from the show ring, a long time ago, Norwich Terrier “Bentley” found his forever home with my sister and family. He lives far away, and until my visit this summer, it had been over a year since I’d seen him. Now 12 years old, he’s slowed down and his muzzle is greying. Overall, he’s a healthy dog, but was surprisingly porky! I was assured that he was eating his expensive prescription dog food, with small daily rations carefully calibrated by his veterinarian. Nobody likes the word, but he’s F-A-T, fat! What’s going on?

I found a clue in my niece’s little journal book. Allison (age 12, same as Bentley) records her life experiences and emotions through poetry. She penned *Dog Donations* on March 23, 2015.

*It started a year ago,  
I am eating.  
You stare me down with brown eyes.  
I resist for a minute,  
Then I give in.  
It’s not on the floor for a second,  
You consume it.  
And resume looking at me,  
Staring with unforgivingly cute eyes.*

*It began not to work.  
So you added whining,  
Licking my foot,  
And even attempting to jump up.  
Now a year later,  
You still try your tricks.  
But I have learned.  
I step back,  
Look at your sleeping form,  
And realize how much you have grown in the sides.  
That’s it. No more dog donations.*

Mystery solved. Those extra calories are obviously to blame, but that’s an oversimplification of the obesity problem. There are lifestyle issues too. Bentley’s metabolism has slowed down with age, and he needs less food to maintain his weight. Knowing how many calories a dog requires is difficult. Bentley’s vet screened for hormone imbalances (e.g., hypothyroidism) and possible medical issues first, and then calculated a reasonable caloric intake

level aiming for a slow steady weight loss. But this is just a starting point. Figuring out his actual metabolic requirements will be a matter of trial and error, and then adjusting the caloric level up or down.

The solution is not easy because, as Allison realized, begging is a dog behavior that is so persuasive. Our dogs will repeat behaviors that are rewarded. Bentley learned that his staring brown eyes caused tasty treats to land on the floor. Ignoring begging is not easy because dogs become more persistent or add a new behavior like whining, barking or jumping. Bentley knows that persistence pays off. In fact, by giving in, Allison was unknowingly using *intermittent reinforcement*, one of the most effective forms of reinforcement in dog training. After a dog has learned a new behavior, dog trainers reward the desired behavior intermittently so that it becomes firmly established and durable. Allison was like a slot machine, and because Bentley never knew exactly when his begging would be rewarded, he didn't stop.

Just a glance around our veterinarians' waiting rooms exposes the growing obesity problem for dogs. Thirty percent of dogs are estimated to be overweight, but less than half of their owners recognize the problem. As in humans, canine obesity causes or worsens all sorts of health problems including musculoskeletal problems (i.e., degenerative arthritis in young dogs, degenerative disk disease, ruptured cruciate ligaments), cardiovascular problems, glucose tolerance imbalances, exercise intolerance, increase heat sensitivity and, in our Norwich Terriers, exacerbates breathing difficulties for dogs affected by Upper Airway Syndrome. Obesity also weakens the immune system and may increase the risks of anesthesia during surgical procedures. Obesity shortens a dog's lifespan.

Human perception is often the problem because owners simply don't know how to gauge the proper weight for their dogs. The Norwich Terrier breed standard says ideal weight of 12 pounds, but even within our breed, because dogs vary in height, bone structure and muscle mass, there is no one correct weight. I look at my Norwich every day, and sometimes feel their sides and ribs (I want to feel the ribs without much pressure). I also like to weigh them periodically (using my scale, not the vet's) and record their weights. Some simply require fewer calories than others. Unlike the majority of dog owners, Allison recognized that Bentley was overweight, and why. Bentley isn't going to make healthy food choices on his own, but he's a lucky Norwich Terrier to have Allison to make decisions on his behalf. And, he is slimming down.

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