

Free Feeding and Dogs

United Animal Friends strongly advises against free feeding of puppies and dogs for many sound reasons.

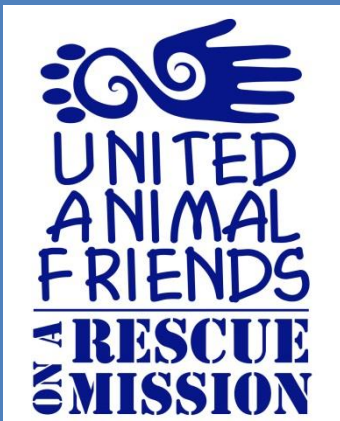
Free feeding means leaving a large quantity of food, usually dry, in one or more bowls on the floor, providing easy access to food whenever a dog feels inclined to eat. Whether you have one dog or ten, this is a ticking time bomb waiting to explode.

Of course, there will always be exceptions to every rule, but dogs that do fare well with free feeding are the exceptions, not the rule. It is simply not a good idea.

Let's begin at the beginning... with the puppies. Dogs need to view us as their pack leaders, the alphas. We don't need to be bossy about it, but by being the one who provides food to the pack, you are naturally sending the message that you are in charge as the alpha leader. This simple gesture, in the language of canines, then trickles down into everything else you do as far as training your puppy to have nice manners. Your pup will learn to sit, stay, come and walk on leash much faster because you provide his or her food dish twice daily for meals. They will look to you for guidance and leadership.

Free feeding also takes away the joy and excitement of receiving a treat for a reward when training. This in turn reduces the effectiveness of positive reinforcement for accomplishments, which is the foundation of basic animal training.

After meals, nature takes its course and your puppy will need to go potty. Food passes through a dog's system much faster than ours, so taking your pup out for a potty break a few minutes after eating will make potty training a cinch. If you free feed your pup, he or she will not be on a schedule and will feel the need to go, whenever. You will then feel the need to clean the floor and carpet, whenever. Feed the same time in the same place and with the same bowl every day. Dogs thrive on routine and schedule, and you'll be a lot happier too!



The same principle applies when bringing any new dog into your home, no matter the dog's age or level of training. Providing your dog's meals establishes the hierarchy of your pack, a primal language understood by canines for thousands of years.

Picky eaters will fare very well on scheduled feedings. By putting their food dish down for breakfast and dinner only, then picking it up after 15 minutes if they don't eat, they will soon learn to lick their bowl clean. Also, dogs needing special diets should never be free fed.

By feeding breakfast and dinner, you control the amount of food given and can see how your dog is eating. When free feeding, you are not aware of the quantity your dog is eating at each meal. Often you are not aware a problem exists until it manifests itself. Conditions of obesity or underweight dogs are easy to spot, but internal problems are not.

Dogs are unaware that their bodies need food every so many hours. Free fed dogs lost their passion for mealtimes and often go long periods without eating. This causes a decrease in energy and stamina, and some dogs become candidates for things like seizures and hypoglycemia (low blood sugar).

The flip side of the coin is the gluttons. These dogs eat too much food, causing them to become obese. This also causes a decrease in energy and stamina, leads to diabetes, heart disease, chronic painful stress to joints and bones, and increases the risk of cancers.

Healthy digestion and elimination become problematic for these eager eaters, and eating too much food too soon also causes abdominal cramping.

As if all this isn't enough to deter you from free feeding, there's also the issue of aggression. None of us want bullies in our lives. Dogs should never feel the need to worry about their food. You give your dog a sense of security when you prevent other animals from approaching their food dish at mealtimes. You are the alpha and it's your job to protect and keep the atmosphere for the pack calm and happy.

Dogs who would never consider fighting might just go for it over food. This can also broaden into fighting over treats and toys as well. The anticipation of food stealing creates severe anxiety for the dog, whether it's the bully stealing or the submissive dog being stolen from. No matter if one or more food dishes are down, as each dog eats, that dish becomes theirs for the moment. A dog in this state of mind poses a danger to humans and especially to children. Free feeding creates the need to feel protective over food and possessions, and these dogs will learn to bite, and to fight, to keep what they feel is theirs.

Eagerness for meals keeps dogs happy, well-tempered and healthy. UAF's recipe: Feed twice daily, give some healthy snacks between meals, and lots of love and affection throughout the day. It's a great recipe for a happy and healthy pet!