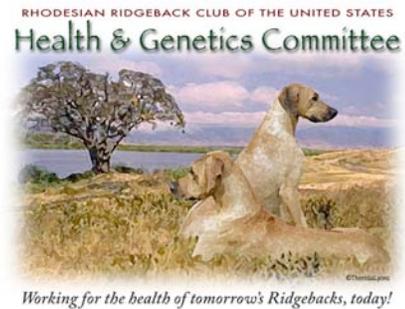


This article has been written for the Health & Genetics Committee of the Rhodesian Ridgeback Club of the United States. www.RhodesianRidgebackHealth.org.

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Fit or Fat?

The recipe for an overweight Ridgeback contains just one ingredient:



Opportunity.

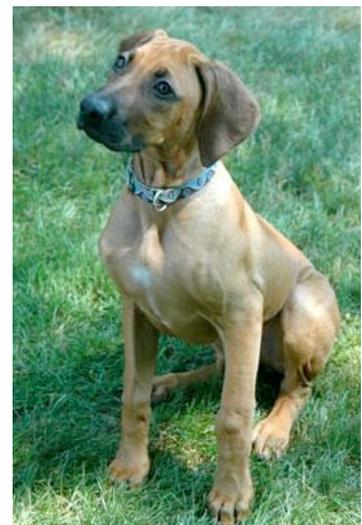
Though there are exceptions, Ridgebacks are notorious chowhounds. With cast-iron stomachs and bottomless appetites, they will eat with all the fervor of a contestant at a hot-dog-eating competition -- if you let them.

Do not free-feed! Veterinarians who encourage their clients to feed their puppies “all they can eat for 15 minutes” clearly have little to no experience with this breed. Most Ridgebacks will eat as long as there is food in front of them. If you have served your dog an adequate portion and he still seems dissatisfied, you can “bulk” up his next meal with filling but low-calorie additions such as green beans or canned pumpkin (*not* pumpkin-pie mix, which has sugar and spices).

Ravenous does not equal starved. Most Ridgebacks *always* seem hungry. Just because yours acts as if he has not eaten in a week doesn't mean you should feed him if he has already had adequate nutrition for the day. Don't fall for the guilt-trip!

A trim Ridgeback is a healthy Ridgeback. Keeping extra weight off your dog will not only make her look and feel good, but it will also help prevent injury. Ridgebacks are by nature athletic and enthusiastic dogs, and they can easily hurt themselves if their excessive body weight impairs their agility.

That goes double for puppies! A roly-poly puppy may be cute, but that extra weight puts a strain on growing bones and connective tissue, and could provoke orthopedic problems. Lean, svelte puppies are best.



Rule out an underlying medical cause. Hypothyroidism, which is not uncommon in Ridgebacks, can cause dramatic weight gain. If your Ridgeback is putting on pounds despite a reasonable diet, have your vet perform a simple blood test to see if your dog's thyroid levels are normal. If your dog turns out to have an underactive thyroid, twice-daily medication will return his metabolism back to normal – and with it, his body weight.



Discourage countersurfing. If you leave food items unattended on tables and countertops, your Ridgeback will learn to jump up and help herself. This happens with a stealth that is equally impressive and infuriating. Be diligent about putting away tempting foods in places where they cannot be swiped, or you will encourage a habit that is notoriously hard to break.

Seek out an experienced eye.

Unfortunately, many veterinarians are not familiar with correct Ridgeback weight and conditioning, and may actually think an overweight Ridgeback is “normal.” If you obtained your dog from a reputable breeder or a Ridgeback rescue group, that’s the best place to ask, “Is she too fat?” If you don’t have those resources, go to a local dog show and observe the Ridgebacks being exhibited.

Unfortunately, many veterinarians are not

Rule of thumb: Ridgebacks can vary considerably in size, and many weigh slightly more than the guidelines listed in the official AKC standard (85 pounds for males and 70 pounds for females). However, a male that weighs more than 100 pounds, and a female that clocks in at over 80 pounds, is likely overweight.

Avoid a Labrador retriever silhouette! If you do not spend time around well-conditioned Ridgebacks who are in good weight, it can be hard to know just what your Ridgeback should look like. He should *not* have the beefy outline of a Labrador retriever, but rather, a slim, athletic silhouette that suggests a dog that can run all day and never tire.

Your first hint is the underline. Looking at your Ridgeback from the side, the bottom of the chest should not be a straight parallel line all the way to his rear legs. Instead, he should have a *clearly defined tuckup* that follows the tapering of his ribs up to his loin. If you can’t see this “waist,” your Ridgeback is likely overweight.



Second, consider the “aerial view.” Look down at your Ridgeback and follow his ribcage to the end. On a fit and trim Ridgeback, there should be a natural indentation and narrowing where the ribs end and the loin begins, just before the legs. On an overweight Ridgeback, this just looks like a straight line (or a bulging one!).

Finally, an overweight Ridgeback will have a beefy, stocky look. There might be rolls around his neck and dimpling on his hindquarters just above his tail. This is not muscle – it’s *fat!*

Case Study: Meet Max

A picture is worth a thousands words. So here is Max, a handsome young Ridgeback owned by Elaine Petersen of Windermere, Fla., who fought the battle of the bulge -- and won!

In August 2005, Max tipped the scales at 107 pounds, but Elaine thought that was a perfect weight for him. There were a couple of Ridgebacks in the neighborhood, and one weighed 125 pounds. "Max was slender compared to them!" she remembers.

But then Elaine picked up her new puppy -- and noticed all of the breeder's "in shape" Ridgebacks.

"Max is 28 inches tall and very active," Elaine says. "He will run for hours with his buddy Bruiser next door. He also *loves* to eat, steal food, counter-surf -- you know, all the typical Ridgeback behaviors. I also have a husband who loves to spoil him with cheese, and dog bones and *gravy!*"



BEFORE Max went on a diet (above left), he looked well padded, not "muscular"! In his **AFTER** photo (above right), he is at a perfect weight, with a clearly defined tuck-up and just the hint of ribs showing.

Elaine was determined to help Max take off the weight. So she cut his twice-daily meals from 2 cups of kibble per serving to 1 _ cups, supplementing each with 1 cup of green beans. And she eliminated the treats entirely.

"I laughed, thinking, 'Yeah, what dog is going to eat green beans?'" she says. "But the laugh is on me. I started Max on the infamous 'green been' diet at the end of August, and by December he weighed 89 pounds! Not only did he look like a puppy again, he was faster (which may not be a good thing!), and much more playful, and I swear he stops and poses when I bring the camera out!"



Notice how much older Max looks in his BEFORE photo of 107 pounds (left) – those extra pounds put on quite a strain! Now, at his correct AFTER weight of just under 90 pounds (right), even his head is less flabby!



Today, Max is holding steady at 89 pounds. Elaine started lure-coursing him this spring, and experienced performance folks suggested she take another five pounds off Max to improve his speed – not to mention reduce the risk of injury. “So, I guess it’s back to the green-bean diet for a couple of months!”

“I’m so glad you are putting this subject on the web -- we really never thought Max was fat,” Elaine adds. “No one who knows him thought he was fat. Even my vet thought he looked good before. Of course, now everyone, including my vet, thinks he is ‘hot stuff’...and so does he!”



Here’s Max playing with his new sister, **BEFORE** and **AFTER**. Overweight Ridgebacks are much more prone to injury when they exert themselves playing or running.

The Flip Side: Too Thin



Alyssa Moon Dyke of Rhodesian Ridgeback Rescue provided this photograph of a Ridgeback who is too thin. The 3-year-old wasn’t starved or abused by her previous owners – she just lacked that classic “Sizzler buffet” Ridgeback appetite.

“She refused to eat any kibble or canned food, no matter what we did to entice her,” Alyssa says, adding that eventually the dog put some weight on with a home-prepared diet.

At about 25 inches tall at the shoulder, “she is far too thin in this picture,” Alyssa concludes.

“Her shoulder blades were totally without any sort of muscle or fat ‘padding,’ and her ribs, hips, and spine were obvious from all angles.”