

Dear Dr. Wise:

Question: I own an eight-month-old Springer Spaniel. I've been working Jake all fall and plan to hunt him on weekends. Are there feeding guidelines to follow to keep up his stamina on the long days of hunting and to keep him healthy during the entire season.

Answer: A day in the field with your dog is great sport and exercise for both of you. But without attention to nutrition, the pleasure of the hunt can become a nightmare for a dog. The exercise subjects him to extreme physical stress and can drain his energy supply (calories) which is stored in his liver.

Jake probably is close to his optimal weight, so you will want to feed him throughout the season to maintain it. Though you read a lot about protein requirements, your major concern should be to satisfy his high energy needs.

During a day of hunting, a dog will burn the normal amount of calories. So you should feed Jake extra rations on Thursday and Friday before a weekend hunt. Then, about 20 minutes before you leave for a hunt, give him half a normal days food. Also, fill your pockets with high quality dry food and feed him a few handfuls at a time throughout the hunt.

This feeding program is essential. Some dogs will be active and hunt well the rest of the day. Others may encounter much more serious problems and stumble, pant or even faint or have seizures due to hypoglycemia (a temporary drop in blood sugar) if they drain their energy supply. The dog needs an immediate "dose" of calories – a small amount of candy bar or Karo syrup. He will be through hunting for the day.

One dangerous threat to hunting dogs is stomach bloat. We don't know everything about it but we do know it can occur when a dog with an empty stomach eats and drinks too fast. He sucks in too much air which fills the stomach too full and causes it to twist on itself. The tissues of the stomach will begin to die and put the dog in a life or death situation in a matter of hours or even minutes.

To help protect against bloat you can give your dog water after you get home from hunting but resist feeding him for 30-40 minutes after he drinks. This way he won't gulp everything down at once. If you have more than one dog, feed each separately to prevent competitive overeating. It is best to split the rations into two feedings. On non-hunting days, feed your dog two-three times a day. Give him all he can eat in 30 minutes. Dogs which do not tend to overeat can be fed free choice.

The important points to remember are to feed Jake extra rations before hunting and high-nutrition snacks throughout the day in the field. While he is young, Jake will need even more calories than he will as a mature adult.

If you have a question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Ave, Ste. 405, Indianapolis, IN 46225 or www.invma.org