



Hip hip hooray

The BVA/KC hip-testing scheme has been used for almost a quarter of a century in the UK, with little improvement. A new, more accurate testing scheme could really shake things up

Can you imagine keeping a Labrador short of food for his whole life? That's what a team of scientists from Nestle Purina did a few years ago. They took pairs of gender-matched puppies from 24 different litters and while one of the pair was fed a normal diet, the other was fed only 75 per cent of the recommended amount.

The results were pretty amazing. The Labradors fed the restricted diet lived 15 per cent longer - almost two years. Yep. Put away those treats right now! And for those of you thinking, "Ah yes... but is a life without treats worth living?" there was something else the study found: the Labradors on a restricted diet developed hip dysplasia much later - and they got it less severely. So there you go. No excuse. Keep him lean and your dog will not only be with you for longer, he'll lead a more athletic, more pain-free life.

I confess I am one of life's gannets. It's a terrible failing and although I walk the dogs for up to two hours a day on Salisbury Plain, I see this not as a way to get slim but as a means of being able to eat more without having to widen the doorways of our house.

I am the fat police with my dogs, though. All mine (and I can't tell you how many there are here at the moment because I find it better to not count) are slim. The moment I

notice one of them has put on a couple of pounds, their rations are cut.

This is usually my Flat Coat, Maisie, who lurks in wait in the kitchen for food to drop from the counter tops. And if it doesn't drop, she gives it a helping tongue. She can do this the second anyone's back is turned.

I am pretty good at keeping the counters clear of any food (mostly because it's already gone down my own gullet), but my other half, Jon, is dreadful. Hence in the past week, Maisie has had two whole slabs of Normandy unsalted butter, endless pieces of toast and marmalade, a full-English breakfast cooked up for a visiting friend, and two pints of home-made chicken stock, which was sitting in an unlidded pan on the stove.

Fortunately, I am immune to the look on her face when, as a result, her tea consists of two tiny nuggets of Burns and a teaspoon of meat.

Big issue

Last year, a retriever cross we had rehomed through my rescue as a beautiful six-month-old ladster came back to us just a few months later fully 20kg overweight. I probably should have kept quiet, but I was so cross that they had allowed this beautiful boy to get so heavy that I made a point of telling them. It did not go down well, but I hope if they ever get another dog that they'll take

greater care. Overfeeding a dog is abuse, never mind that it's done with love in your heart.

But I digress. The purpose of this month's article is to highlight something else that the Nestle Purina Labrador study found - something just as important as the effect of diet on longevity. And it was this: every Labrador in the study was assessed when young for hip dysplasia - tested both by the conventional hip-scoring method generally used in the USA/UK and by a revolutionary new method known as PennHIP, developed by Professor Gail Smith at the University of Pennsylvania.

Most of the dogs were perfectly sound, as only in the most severe cases does hip dysplasia affect mobility in young dogs. Hip schemes were developed as a means to predict which dogs will go on to be crippled by osteoarthritis/degenerative joint disease when they are older. It's long been known that tight hips are better than loose ones, so this is what all hip schemes measure. But they do it in different ways and it turned out that the PennHIP method was vastly more accurate in predicting which dogs would go on to suffer.

Even better, you can test the dogs when they're just 16 weeks old (compared to a year), which is a huge help to breeders trying to decide which dogs to keep for their breeding programmes. In fact, there are now over 20 peer-reviewed scientific papers

that show that PennHIP is better than the conventional methods.

Responsible breeders have been hip-testing their dogs in the UK using the current BVA/KC scheme since 1984. It has cost them millions of pounds. The scheme was the first mass-screening programme introduced for dogs and was pretty revolutionary at the time. But there's a huge problem. Twenty-five years on, a handful of breeds have seen average hip scores come down a few points, but there has been very little improvement overall.

A complex mix

Sadly, hip dysplasia today is as big a problem as it ever was and there is increasing disillusion among breeders about the scheme's worth. Many will tell you how dogs with good hip scores can produce puppies with bad hip scores - and occasionally vice versa.

Part of the reason for this is because hip dysplasia is a complex mix of genes and environment that we're only just beginning to unravel. But there are other, more predictable, reasons too. First, you don't have to have your dog hip scored before you breed from him or her. And even if you do, there's nothing to stop you breeding from the dog even if it has a bad hip score. Astonishingly, this is true even for breeders under the Kennel Club's Accredited Breeder Scheme.

Then there's the problem

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increasingly easy given digital X-rays) and the scores will contribute to a breed database (anonymously). The advice is only to breed from dogs that are in the best 40 per cent for each breed and that, says Professor Smith, definitely will result in a slow but steady decline in the rate of hip dysplasia.

"Unfortunately, there are probably some breeds in which hip dysplasia is 'fixed' - such as the Labrador and Pembroke Welsh Corgi, possibly the Golden Retriever too," Professor Smith told me. "This means that they are all genetically destined to get osteoarthritis, but by only breeding from the best 40 per cent, you will produce dogs that will suffer less."

What's the answer?

It should be remembered that hip dysplasia is not an inevitability in every breed of dog. Borzois have amazing hips, as do many sighthounds that have been selectively bred to run and run fast. So should we be crossing Borzois with German Shepherds in order to improve their hips? Probably not. This was actually tried as an experiment and the resulting Shepzois had dreadful hip dysplasia - a reminder that hip dysplasia remains a very complex mix of genetics and environment. But adopting PennHIP as the UK's official hip-screening method would be a fantastic thing to do for our dogs. So the message to the BVA and KC is: over to you. ■

For more information about PennHIP and to find a UK vet offering it, see www.pennhip.org

of vets who find obvious hip dysplasia on a physical examination and either advise their client not to go ahead with an X-ray or who are persuaded by their client that it would be a waste of time. These dogs may not be bred from, but their official hip scores, which would be of enormous help to pedigree analysts, are never recorded.

False negatives

But the biggest issue is simply that the current hip-scoring method isn't that good. If it tells you that your dog has hip dysplasia, it's very likely to be right, but the problem is that it throws up a lot of false negatives - in other words, if it tells you that your dog has good hips, it is rather too likely to be wrong. In fact, according to Professor Gail Smith, who developed PennHIP, it fails to find around 50 per cent of dogs that will go on to develop debilitating osteoarthritis.

That means that, for the past

25 years, breeders have - in total good faith - been breeding from many dogs that they should not have been. Blimey. No wonder the hip scores haven't improved much.

So why don't we all change to the superior PennHIP method? Actually, we should - and, indeed, there are already some breeders here in the UK using PennHIP, as it's now being offered by a handful of vets. There is also some interest from the BVA, who sent a representative to attend a recent seminar on PennHIP given by Professor Smith at Cambridge.

PennHIP is more expensive than the conventional scheme, particularly given that PennHIP advises that you X-ray your dogs more than once in a lifetime (rather than just the once considered necessary under the BVA/KC scheme).

Nevertheless, it is growing in popularity and the benefit - as breeders in the US who have fully adopted PennHIP have

found - is a much-reduced incidence of hip dysplasia in their lines and the knowledge that you are contributing to the overall health of a breed.

There are no ifs and buts with PennHIP - the X-rays of every dog have to be submitted for expert assessment at the University of Pennsylvania (something that is

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