

# Developing a Breed-Specific Body Mass Index: A Cooperative Project

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## HEALTH

Recently I wrote an article for the AKC Gazette, "Obesity and Our Dogs" which gave me the idea of developing a breed-specific body mass index for dogs. According to the American Obesity Association ( ) more than 25 percent of adults and 14 percent of children and adolescents in the United States are obese, and obesity is the second leading cause of death in this country. (113-129 percent above ideal body weight is considered overweight; above that, obese.)

This problem also affects our pets, as the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences recently published a study estimating that obesity occurs in 25 percent of cats and dogs in westernized societies. Responsible members of the purebred dog fancy must take a proactive stand against canine obesity. Nestle/Purina recently undertook a life-long study of a family of Labrador Retrievers, a breed prone to obesity. An experimental group of dogs was fed 25 percent less than the control group, which was allowed 15 minutes per day of free-choice feeding. The study showed significant health benefits for the experimental group including a vastly reduced incidence and severity of all health conditions and, in particular, joint disease. In addition, the median life span was increased by 15 percent. The study proved the necessity of weight control among our dogs, but what is still needed is a tool whereby dog owners can measure their dogs' fitness.

In humans, the National Institute of Health has developed a body mass

index which measures body fat based on height and weight. To calculate your body mass index go to [www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/bmi-calc.htm](http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/bmi-calc.htm). Or, enter Body Mass Index into your search engine for more information. While the index described above is universally applicable for all ages and both sexes, the National Center for Health Statistics recently released a new BMI specifically for children and adolescents.

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These indexes are considered the most accurate assessment of body condition available.

No such index exists for dogs, so it is exceedingly difficult for pet owners to evaluate their dogs' body condition. Hills/Science Diet maintains a listing of ideal weights by breed ([www.petfit.com](http://www.petfit.com)) that can be used as a guideline, but it does not take into account the wide range of sizes among dogs of a particular breed. The Purina Body Condition System is a visual nine-step chart that instructs pet owners to observe (and feel) their pet's condition on a scale from one to nine, with one being emaciated and nine being grossly obese. However, pet owners are notoriously inaccurate at judging their dogs' conditions even with the Nestle/Purina chart in front of them.

The Body Mass Index Project I propose would be a joint venture involv-

ing the Canine Health Foundation, the AKC Delegates' Health Committee and the AKC Delegates/ Parent Club Committee. Because the body mass index of a Greyhound is very different from that of a Basset Hound, any BMI for dogs must be breed specific. With funding through the canine Health Foundation, parent clubs would be given the responsibility of gathering ideal height/weight ratios of their breeds at various life stages.

This data would be processed and organized into a body mass index for every AKC breed. With such a tool we would be able to assess breed-specific ideal fitness of our dogs at various developmental stages.

The project currently is in the planning stages. AKC/CHF is planning to solicit a research proposal through its Acorn Grant system. These are small grants (\$12,000 or less) which can be awarded by the Grants Committee without going through the lengthy peer review process. When the grant has been awarded, the effort will be coordinated and, hopefully, these useful indexes will become a reality in a timely manner. By promoting the health of purebred dogs everywhere, this project would foster goodwill among us and throughout the dog community at large. 🐾

*(Please note: the AKC Delegates' Canine Health Committee has approved this article and its distribution is encouraged.)*