

My beagle is 6 years old and is having trouble breathing. He pants heavily even when it isn't hot and he hasn't exercised. Otherwise he seems healthy except for being a little overweight. Should I be concerned?

A check-up by your veterinarian will be needed to listen carefully to his heart and lungs for signs of cardiac or pulmonary disease. Chest x-rays and an EKG may be needed in addition. If no primary diseases are found that could cause him to be breathing heavily, his symptoms might be related to being overweight. Beagles are a breed that commonly becomes obese if overfed and not given enough exercise. They are bred to be hunting dogs, running for hours a day. As pets, they are quite content to lounge around the house and tend to put on weight.

Various research projects have been done to compare dogs of normal weight to overweight dogs in reference to breathing problems. If a dog is obese, fat in their abdomen pushes their diaphragm forward and prevents their lungs from expanding normally. It becomes harder for them to get enough oxygen and therefore causes them to breathe faster.

There are other conditions that might not occur in a normal weight dog that become more of a problem in obese dogs. The effects of heat stroke on an overweight dog are more dangerous due to several reasons. The extra insulation that their body fat levels provide makes them more susceptible to the effects of high temperature. The main method of cooling their rising body temperature in a situation of pending heat stroke is by panting. If an obese dog cannot breathe as well at normal temperatures, when the environmental temperature goes up, they are unable to get rid of excess heat by panting. One study of dogs diagnosed with heatstroke showed obese dogs were twice as likely to die compared to normal weight dogs.

Collapsing trachea (windpipe) is a fairly commonly seen problem, particularly in small dogs. The trachea has rings that support it made of cartilage. In this inherited disease the cartilage is weakened and the trachea collapses on itself making it harder for air to get through and triggering coughing particularly with excitement or exercise. In many dogs with this anatomical problem, they don't show any signs unless there is a trigger. One of the triggers or risk factors shown in studies is obesity. Again, the increased fat in the chest cavity can put more pressure on the already narrowed trachea and reduce the ability to breathe.

If his weight is a contributing factor to his breathing problems, breathing easier will be just one of the benefits derived from putting him on a diet and getting him back to a healthy weight.

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