



Fat Is a Four-Legged Word

Underwater treadmills, melba toast, and no more canned peaches: An obese Chihuahua shapes up for summer. BY ARIANNE COHEN

LOLA IS FIVE YEARS OLD and weighs 16.2 pounds. Most Chihuahuas hover between four and six pounds. "I get yelled at on the street," says her owner, Pamela Arconti, an executive assistant on Wall Street. "She looked good at thirteen pounds. Her clothes fit. After that, I had to get Velcro extensions for her harness. Then the ridicule started." Lola started developing a weight problem at six months, about the time Arconti began giving in to her constant begging, to the point where Lola consumes a bowl of dry food, a 3.5-ounce can of dog food, two Newman's Own organic dog treats, a 4-ounce cup of sliced peaches, and assorted scraps of people food per day. "She likes peaches, and so do I," says Arconti. "We have the same trigger foods."



What a normal-weight Chihuahua looks like.

Lola isn't unique; veterinarians estimate that a quarter of the city's dogs are overweight. "I see a 50-pound cocker spaniel that's supposed to be 35 pounds," says Lawrence Zola, an Upper East Side vet. "He's like a coffee table." Canine obesity is linked to joint and heart problems, shortened life spans and human obesity (heavy dogs often have heavy owners). It's also a target of growing veterinary attention: The FDA recently approved Slentrol, the first major canine weight-loss drug, recommended as a last resort for

dogs at least 20 percent over normal weight, if diet and exercise don't work. But is there any non-pharmaceutical hope for Lola? Even though she's nearly 200 percent over the ideal, she's lazy, gluttonous, and doesn't think she has a problem. Arconti, on the other hand, has grown tired of the back strain from lugging her companion in a cream-colored shoulder bag, and agreed to enroll the dog in a ten-week test of three of the city's canine weight-loss options: Animal Medical Center, Biscuits & Bath, and trainer Andrea Arden. Results not typical.



Lola on the underwater treadmill.

WEEKS 1 to 6

Animal Medical Center
Fitness Center.

Starting weight 16.2 pounds
Girth 19.3 inches
Cost \$600
(\$50 per session, 12 sessions)

"I've never met a long-haired Chihuahua over eight pounds," says Deirdre Chiamonte, a veterinarian with the program. She points out Lola's neck ripples, butt padding, and thigh

Photograph by Hans Gissinger

ruffles. "Awww, you have thigh ruffles!" coos Arconti. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Chiaramonte documents Lola's exercise regimen: only one walk a day, during which Lola meanders for a block, then lies down. The rest of the time, she relieves herself on wee-wee pads in Arconti's apartment. Lola's sedentary lifestyle is a major factor in her massive size. Chiaramonte ups her to two walks a day.

She also prescribes a diet of dry dog food and low-calorie treats (i.e., melba toast instead of Paul Newman cookies). Lola is introduced to the AMC's various contraptions: a traffic-cone obstacle course, yellow rubber balance balls, and a treadmill submerged in eight inches of water. Upon seeing the various devices, Lola appears terrified. She is assigned twice-weekly workouts with a physical therapist. The goal: Lose two ounces a week.

THE RESULTS: Lola releases a shriek whenever she's placed on the treadmill, but she nevertheless progresses from three-minute to 30-minute jogs. She also learns to run through the obstacle course twenty times at each session and to balance on a yellow ball while the therapist shakes it (to build leg strength). After six weeks, Lola resembles a small buffalo. Her endurance increases notably, but twice-a-week exercise visits are not nearly enough to slough off eight pounds. Chiaramonte congratulates Arconti on being "tough and steadfast" in Lola's weight loss, though she points out that it could be a matter of water weight.

Weight loss: 0.7 pounds
Girth reduction: 1.2 inches

WEEKS 7 to 8

Biscuits & Bath weight-loss program.

Starting weight 15.5 pounds
Girth 18.1 inches
Cost \$650 (10 days at \$35 per day plus \$300 annual membership)

For two weeks, Lola will spend eight hours a day with sixteen other small dogs. "If she's here every day, she's gonna be pretty svelte just from playing with other dogs all day," says manager Aaron Tropp. The overseeing veterinarian, Deborah Sarfaty, puts Lola on a daily schedule of three two-hour play sessions, separated by walks and rest time.

THE RESULTS: Unforeseen circumstances! Lola runs to a corner and lies down for eight hours, stirring only when handlers enter and she tries to escape. She doesn't play with other dogs. "I think she's losing weight from anxiety," says Arconti. Meanwhile, Arconti and the staff don't hit it off. She spends an hour dropping off Lola each morning, then calls throughout the day. Her overattentiveness is unappreciated by staffers. "This program might be okay for anyone less psychotic than me," Arconti allows. Lola's still fat, but firmer now. She learns to sprint, possibly from her many escape attempts.

Weight loss: 0.1 pounds
Girth reduction: 0.4 inches

WEEKS 9 to 10

A session with trainer Arden Arden. Lola's owner must follow her program for two weeks.

Starting weight 15.4 pounds
Girth 17.7 inches
Cost \$150 per hour

Arden, who has run her own company for twelve years, arrives in Arconti's apartment for a home visit, and promptly discards Lola's food bowl. "Lola is going to become a hunting Chihuahua,"



Biscuits & Bath.

she announces. Lola has to work for her daily rations, which are hidden in four Busy Buddy food-dispensing toys scattered around the apartment. The idea is to keep Lola active during the day. Lola dives for the toys. "I've never seen her do anything so doglike," muses Arconti. Arden teaches Lola "thinking" games, like puppy push-ups (lie down, sit, repeat), and oversees fifteen minutes of daily doggy running exercises in the hallway. Arden also teaches Arconti strategies to lengthen Lola's walks.

THE RESULTS: Arconti is thrilled. "I am in shock at how smart she is," she says. "I had no idea." Lola's walks increase to four blocks, and Arconti plays games with Lola while she watches television in the evenings. Arconti now refers to Lola as her "little Mensa hippity-hoppety," a major change

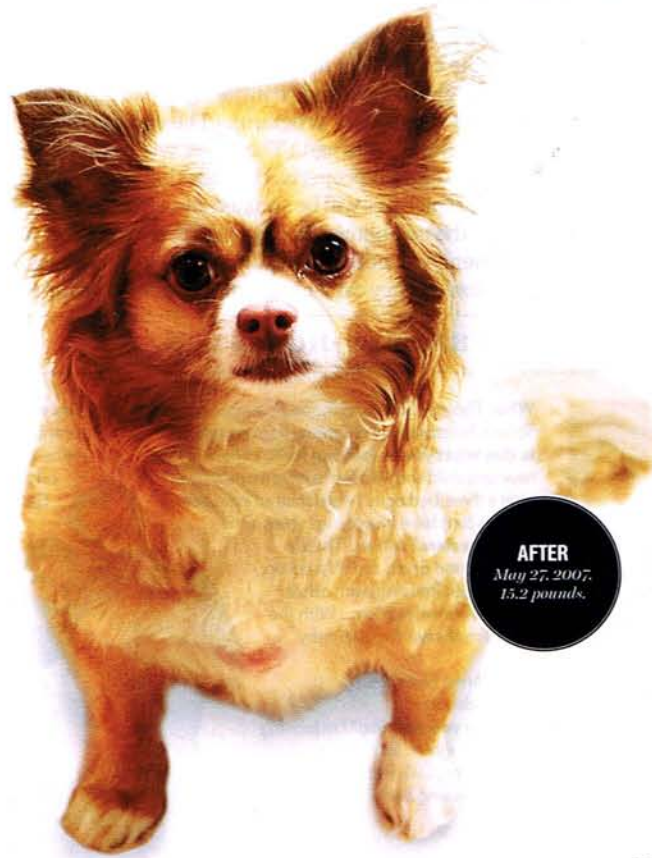
from "my little fat turkey." Lola has progressed to—dare we say it?—chubby. The neighbors are impressed. "The normal people who make fun of her say she looks different," says Arconti. "One blurted, 'Is that the one in the bag?'" Lola now "runs" around, and Arconti reports witnessing one actual jump. She is on a permanent diet of limited dog food dispensed from dog toys.

Weight loss: 0.2 pounds
Girth reduction: None

A NEW LOLA (SORT OF)

Weight loss 1 pound
Girth reduction 1.6 inches
Total cost \$1,400

THE RESULTS: After all this, Lola is still morbidly obese, and behind in her goal of losing two ounces per week. "A lot of her weight surrounds her heart, and the fat could exacerbate tracheal collapse," says Chiaramonte. "She is also at risk for vaginitis caused by all the extra tissue." Chiaramonte suggests that Lola continue her diet and workout routine, and Arconti could consider Slentrol if she stops losing weight. For now, she's enrolling Lola in agility classes with Arden. "I think my little nugget is on her way to being less turkey and more Chihuahua," Arconti says.



AFTER
May 27, 2007,
15.2 pounds.

HELP FOR CHUNKY CHOWHOUNDS

Twist-n-Treat

A toy that makes dogs work for food (\$7.99 to \$15.99, depending on size, at busybuddytoys.com).

Charlie Bear Treats

Low-calorie biscuits are also low-sodium, to keep off water weight (\$4.99 for a one-pound bag at drsfostersmith.com).

Slentrol

FDA-approved canine weight-loss drug reduces appetite while decreasing fat absorption (\$1 to \$2 a day at Animal Medical Center; 212-838-8100).

Sense-ation Harness

Comes in nine sizes to fit even the plumpiest pooch (\$20.65 to \$25.95 at softtouchconcepts.com).

