

Feeding is one of those deceptively simple parts of running a dog daycare that quickly reveals itself to be complex, variable, and emotionally charged. Owners worry about allergies, portion sizes, and whether their dog will get enough attention during mealtime. Staff must manage schedules, prevent food guarding, and maintain strict hygiene. When feeding goes well it supports behavior, energy balance, and group safety. When it goes poorly, you can end up with upset stomachs, fights, and unhappy clients.

I have spent years managing daycares and training teams to handle hundreds of meals and treats a week. Below I describe practical procedures that balance safety, owner expectations, and the realities of running a busy doggie daycare. You will find concrete examples, trade-offs, and the small details that separate a chaotic place from a professional dog day care people trust.

Why feeding matters Feeding touches public health, dog behavior, and customer satisfaction all at once. A single cross-contamination event can trigger a severe allergic reaction. A poorly timed meal can leave a dog lethargic during peak play time, or prompt resource guarding episodes that unsettle the whole group. Clear feeding procedures reduce these risks and make daily operations predictable for staff and reassuring for owners watching through a dog daycare with webcam.

Vaccination and intake checks before any feeding Before we ever talk about treats or kibble, intake screening should be complete. Vaccination requirements usually include rabies, distemper-parvo, and Bordetella. Some centers ask for a recent fecal test and proof of up-to-date flea and tick treatments. These items affect feeding only indirectly, but they are essential to protect the whole group from disease and parasite exposure that can get transmitted through shared spaces during and after meals.

If a dog arrives without documentation, the safest course is to refuse service until paperwork is provided. Making an exception erodes trust and can create legal liabilities if illness follows. For owners who forget paperwork, offer options: a short-term hold on group play with one-on-one care until records arrive, or a supervised drop-in under strict restrictions.

Intake forms [Hip Hounds hiphounds.com](http://hiphounds.com) and food labeling Every dog should come with a signed intake form that lists diet, portion size, feeding times, known allergies, and any medication requirements. In practice, I recommend double labeling: a collar tag with the dog's name and a numbered tag that corresponds to a feeding bin or crate label. That way a staff member can verify the dog visually and against the intake board before each meal. Mistakes happen when dogs look similar or owners use generic storage bags; clear labeling prevents those mistakes.

Portion control and owner preferences Owners often overestimate how much food their dog needs. For a typical adult dog in full-day care, most dogs do fine on 50 to 75 percent of their home portion depending on exercise level. High-energy breeds or dogs that are growing will need more. The first week I had a husky who was dropped off at 7 a.m., exercised hard, and looked famished by noon. We increased his midday portion slightly, added a protein-rich topper, and recorded the change on his intake log. After three days his coat improved and his energy felt more stable.

Two common approaches work well. One, feed exactly what the owner provides and note intake. Two, use the owner's portion as a guideline and adjust within documented limits for activity level and body condition, but always notify the owner in writing. The second approach requires trust and clear communication, and is best for facilities that do regular progress updates or use a dog daycare with webcam so owners can see their dogs eating.

Handling treats, enrichment, and training rewards Treats are where policies vary most. Many daycares allow small training treats for handlers, a few offer enrichment treats during slow hours, and some ban owner-provided treats to prevent secret sharing. In my experience the best policy is to allow owner-provided meals and clearly limit staff-administered treats to small, controlled amounts. Use treats for positive reinforcement during crate settling, nail trims, or during separations that might otherwise create stress.

A practical standard: limit staff treats to an amount that does not exceed 10 percent of daily caloric intake for each dog. That threshold prevents weight creep and reduces the risk of upset stomachs. Always check ingredients for allergens before offering a treat. If a dog has a known grain allergy, do not substitute a staff treat that contains wheat without written owner permission.

Managing allergies and special diets Allergies require vigilance and layered defenses. A typical protocol includes: segregated storage for allergen-free kibble, separate scoops for each food type, dedicated bowls labeled with the dog's name, and a documented allergy notice placed both on the intake board and on the dog's kennel or crate. Staff should also wear gloves when handling allergen-free food if the allergen could be transferred via hands from other foods.

Cross-contact is a real risk. Even trace amounts of peanut or chicken can provoke reactions in sensitized dogs. For dogs with life-threatening allergies, consider feeding them in a separate quiet area and having owners supply sealed meals in single-use containers for staff to open only when seated and with fresh gloves.

If an allergic reaction occurs at the facility, staff need a clear emergency plan: stop feeding, assess breathing and mucous membranes, administer antihistamines only if authorized in the intake form or by a veterinarian, and seek veterinary care immediately if symptoms escalate. Keep a written log of the incident and update the owner in writing the same day.

Meal timing and the dog daycare daily routine Meal timing must fit the overall dog daycare schedule. A typical day balances arrival, play periods, a mid-morning rest, lunchtime, an afternoon play block, and an evening calm-down. Meals should be scheduled to minimize fed dogs joining high-intensity play right afterward because that combination can increase the risk of bloat in deep-chested breeds. For most adult dogs, separate vigorous play from a full meal by at least 45 to 60 minutes.

Here is a pragmatic example of a daily feeding rhythm used in centers I have managed:

1. Morning arrival: small snack only if owner requests or if dog arrived without breakfast, otherwise hold until mid-morning.
2. Mid-morning meal: main breakfast for day guests who had no home meal.
3. Lunchtime: lighter meal or topper, depending on activity.
4. Afternoon: optional small chew or enrichment puzzle near the end of the play day to encourage calm behavior before pickup.

This routine supports predictable energy levels and makes staffing for feeding tasks simpler. There are trade-offs. Feeding only twice reduces staff time and waste, but dogs that are very active may benefit from an extra small meal. Offer owners clear choices when they enroll: two meals, three smaller meals, or owner-supplied feeding times for individualized care.

Safe environments for feeding Where dogs eat matters as much as what they eat. Group feeding on the floor invites resource conflicts. I prefer one of two systems depending on facility size and dog population. For smaller groups, use individual mat stations set apart so dogs can eat with visual partitions or low barriers. For larger groups, feed by cohorts where dogs that are compatible eat together under supervision, while dogs with any guarding tendencies or medical needs eat separately in a quiet room or a crate.

Crate feeding reduces guarding incidents but requires dogs to be crate-trained and comfortable. If you feed in crates, rotate dogs out for supervised rest and socialization between meals to prevent overuse. Clean bowls after every use, sanitize food bowls daily, and wash hands or change gloves between handling different dogs' food.

Bowl and utensil hygiene Proper cleaning prevents bacterial growth and cross-contamination. Use a dishwasher at the hottest setting for metal and ceramic bowls, or sanitize by soaking in a bleach solution appropriate for animal facilities if a dishwasher is unavailable. Replace plastic bowls regularly because scratches harbor bacteria. Scoops should be color-coded or labeled to match food bins so staff do not inadvertently cross-use scoops.

When handling wet food or medicated diets, staff should use disposable gloves and disposable paper liners for bowls if owners request. For medicated diets delivered in pill form, document each medication given, time, and dose in the dog's medical log. A medication error is one of the quickest ways to lose client trust.

Treats and enrichment devices Enrichment is part of a modern dog daycare's service offering, but it complicates feeding. Puzzle feeders slow ingestion, which is valuable for dogs that gulp. Frozen Kong's with a yogurt and puree combo are popular, but dairy can upset some dogs. If you offer commonly used enrichment foods, maintain a list of safe fillers and a protocol for owner approval.

Keep enrichment ingredients simple, easy to clean, and low in fat and sugar. Replace porous toys regularly. If you run a webcam-enabled facility, a frozen treat shown on camera is a marketing win, but make sure you have documented that the owner approved the enrichment ingredients and portion size.

Handling picky eaters and food refusal Dogs refuse food for many reasons, not all medical. Stress from a new environment, separation anxiety, or a recent change in diet can cause temporary refusal. For a dog that refuses repeatedly, do a quick health check: alertness, water intake, stool consistency, and any vomiting. If the dog continues to refuse, hold food for a short period and try a bland diet upon vet approval later. Always communicate with the owner the same day and offer options: bring a familiar topper, allow owner to swap food, or provide one-on-one comfort to encourage eating.

Long-term picky behavior may require a collaborative plan with the owner and a trainer. Record everything: the time, what was offered, attempts to feed, and any behavioral signs.

Dealing with resource guarding and behavioral risks Resource guarding during feeding is less common in a well-screened population, but when it appears you must act decisively. Immediate steps are to separate the dog until it calms, then use desensitization under the guidance of a qualified behaviorist. Do not try to "out-handle" a seriously guarding dog without training. If a dog has a known history of guarding, feed it in a separate space and consider adding a behavior plan to intake documentation.

Training staff to recognize subtle signals is crucial. A low growl or stiff body posture during a shared meal should be treated as early warning signs, not tolerated until they escalate into full aggression.

Communicating with owners and transparency Owners want clarity about how their dog is fed. A daily feeding note is a small but high-value touch. Use short written updates like: "Fed 8:45 a.m., ate full portion, no treats, calm during meal." If you provide a dog daycare with webcam, make sure your feed shows the feeding area or record short clips owners can review; that transparency reduces second-guessing.

Charge for special diets or extra feedings when appropriate. Many facilities include two feedings in the base price and charge a nominal fee for extra meals or specialty diets requiring separate storage. Be explicit in your enrollment contract.

Special cases: puppies, seniors, and medical diets Puppies require more frequent, smaller meals. A 12-week-old puppy might eat three to four small meals spaced through the day. That changes staffing needs and the physical layout for feeding. Seniors frequently have dental issues and may need softened food. Medical diets must be

handled with care. If a dog requires veterinary prescription food, only give what the owner supplies and follow storage and handling instructions precisely.

For dogs with feeding tubes or other veterinary devices, most daycares refer them to veterinary boarding facilities rather than accepting them into group care. That is a reasonable risk-management decision and should be stated clearly in your intake policy.

Examples from the field A medium-sized day care I managed used a color-coded bin system. Each dog had a bin with its name and feeding instructions. Staff prepared morning meals before arrival, labeled bowls and scoops, and staged them in a refrigerated prep area. Dogs were walked into the feeding area singly, placed on separated mats, and monitored. The system reduced mix-ups to near zero and shortened feeding time by 30 percent because staff no longer had to search for instructions.

In another center, a client's dog with a severe protein allergy was accidentally exposed to a treat during a holiday party. The team's inadequate labeling and a relaxed treat policy were to blame. The dog experienced hives and required a vet visit. After that incident the facility implemented stricter storage rules, mandatory glove use for allergen-free food, and a written guarantee to owners about procedures. The investment restored trust and prevented further reactions.

Final practical checklist for operators

1. Require and verify vaccination requirements and intake paperwork before first meal.
2. Label every dog's food and bowl, use separate scoops, and store special diets in segregated bins.
3. Schedule meals to fit the dog daycare daily routine and separate vigorous play from full meals by 45 to 60 minutes.
4. Limit staff-administered treats to small amounts and document all enrichment ingredients.
5. Have an emergency protocol for allergic reactions and medication errors, and communicate immediately with the owner.

Feeding is an operational core that touches every part of your service. Thoughtful procedures protect health, prevent conflict, and reassure owners who want the best dog day care for their pet. Attention to the small things like labeling, documentation, and the timing of play versus meals pays off in fewer incidents, better canine welfare, and a stronger reputation.

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