



Weight Management

Overweight and obese pets are becoming an alarmingly common occurrence. If you have been given this handout, your pet is one of them. The biggest obstacles to treating obesity are convincing the owners that their pet is obese and convincing them that it is worth it to make the changes that will be necessary. Another difficulty is that, for our pets, obesity is a physical and medical issue, but it has many emotional aspects for people. Obesity is a disease, and no pet owner wants to accept that they may have a hand in causing their pets to have a disease. Veterinarians hear many excuses from people for their pets' obesity which do not help change the situation. In order to clear the air and dispel some myths, here are some common statements:

“He always gains weight in the winter.” So feed him less in the winter. He doesn't need the calories, don't give them to him.

“She doesn't eat that much!” Yes, she does. It doesn't matter what the amount is. Whatever it is, it is too much.

“He/she only got fat because he/she was neutered/spayed.” No, they got fat because they took in more calories than their body used. Spaying and neutering *does* decrease their metabolism and their caloric needs up to 20%, so they should be fed less than an unaltered pet the same size from the very first day they are home from surgery.

“She is a very picky eater. She'll refuse to eat and starve if I don't give her hot dogs/cheese/ ice cream/roast beef/chicken.....etc.” If she were truly a picky eater, she would be thin. She has trained you to give her what she wants (people food) by refusing to touch what she doesn't want (dog food).

“I don't give him anything extra but my spouse/kids/parents/in-laws/neighbors, etc gives him whatever he wants.” For effective weight loss to occur, everyone that has a hand in the pets' diet must be on board. You must convince your spouse/kids/parents/in-laws/neighbors that they are killing him with kindness, but the end result is the same.

Why does obesity occur?

The abundant supply of highly nutritious and high calorie foods and treats, coupled with a less active lifestyle in many cases, inevitably results in the storage of the excess energy as fat. Over thousands of years, dogs and cats have survived, in part, for their ability to efficiently accumulate this body fat in times of plenty in preparation for times of famine. When food was scarce animals with the largest fat stores had the greatest likelihood of successfully surviving. Now that these animals are pets, they no longer undergo periods of famine.

Because our pets are not adapted to the concept of constant feast they readily gain more and more fat. In fact, the excess of fat has become so commonplace that abnormally large accumulations of fat have become the accepted norm. Accumulations of fat over the ribs that prevent them from easily being felt and indistinguishable waistlines are often not recognized as cues that a pet is overweight or potentially obese. Trim and healthy dogs are sometimes erroneously determined to be too thin.

Why is obesity a concern?

Obesity is not just about how the pet looks, we love our pets no matter what they look like. Obesity is a disease that puts the pet in a state of altered metabolism and can have many consequences including diabetes mellitus, arthritis, and breathing problems. And if those things are not scary enough, **in studies it has been shown that, on average, overweight pets have a shorter lifespan by up to 2 years.** Thus keeping pets lean can greatly **improve both quality and quantity of life.** Few medical conditions with such severe adverse consequences can be so easily prevented and readily treated. Veterinarians have had to adapt to the importance of weight management as a key component of preventative veterinary medicine and overall wellness.

How is obesity determined (is my pet fat)?

Prevention of obesity starts with close monitoring of every pet's amount of body fat through the use of a body condition score (BCS). A BCS is simply a number grade that describes the amount of fat that pet has accumulated. Some systems use a 5-point scale and others use a 9-point scale.

A BCS scale is used in the following manner:

- A BCS of 1 indicates that a dog or cat is too thin, emaciated
- A BCS of 5 (5-point systems) or 9 (9-point systems) suggests that a pet is very obese
- A pet that is a 3 (5-point systems) or a 4 or 5 (9-point systems) has an ideal body weight
- Each point above or below 3 on the 5-point system is 20% to 30% over- or underweight, or 10% to 15% for each point above or below 5 on the 9-point system.

Determining a pet's body condition score is much more useful than simply using their body weight as a guide to determine whether they are overweight since there can be a large variation in appropriate body weight for different sized pets. For example, it is difficult to know if a 65-pound Labrador retriever or a 21-pound Main coon cat is overweight, but if they are judged to have a body condition score of 6 out of 9, we know that they are each approximately 10% to 15% overweight.

How is a weight loss plan developed?

Pets that are overweight and at risk of becoming obese or pets that are already obese can benefit from a weight loss plan. Weight loss plans are designed to achieve steady weight loss while keeping the pet as comfortable as possible, as well as preserving lean muscle during fat loss. It is generally recommended that pets lose no more than 2% of their body weight per week. Rates greater than 2% are associated with feeling (and acting) hungrier, a slowing of the pet's metabolism (making weight loss even more difficult), and preferential burning of muscle for energy rather than body fat.

Surprisingly, some pets only need 50% of the calories they have been getting, calculated using body weight alone to maintain their weight, whereas others need up to 50% more. Because of the large amount of variation from pet to pet, a veterinarian's best clue to the amount of calories that a specific pet needs is determining from the owner the pet's current caloric intake. Getting an accurate and complete list of all foods and treats (a diet history) that the pet is currently fed allows the veterinarian to calculate the amount of calories the pet is receiving and helps to ensure that the weight loss plan does not excessively restrict or provide too many calories. If an accurate diet history cannot be obtained, the veterinarian uses the pet's current weight to create an initial recommendation.

Sometimes an accurate diet history cannot be obtained because the pet is fed free-choice, in other words, food is available all the time and the owner simply fills the bowl when it empties. Free choice feeding almost always results in an obese pet. Pets today are still the ancestors of wolves, who had to gorge on food when it was available in preparation for times it would not be. Consequently, most pets have retained the instinct that if food is available, they need to eat as much of it as they can. This problem is usually magnified in a multiple pet household where the drive to eat is coupled with a real or perceived competition for food. The first thing to change in any weight management program is **stop having food available all the time** and get pets used to meal feeding. The pet will have a certain amount of food recommended for the day, place half of it in a bowl, give it to the pet, and take it away when it is gone or in 10 minutes, repeat later in the day. Pets that are used to grazing will learn quickly that the food is no longer always there and they need to eat when it is. In multiple pet households this means everyone must have their own dish. If there is a bully in the household or slow eaters in danger of losing their dinner, pets may have to be separated at mealtime.

Whichever approach is utilized, the long-term success is completely dependent on following the pet's response to the recommendation. Even with the most accurate and complete diet history and the best calculations, the initial weight loss plan may not result in weight loss of around 2% of body weight per week and can, at times, even result in weight gain. Therefore, veterinarians use regular body weight checks (every 4 weeks or so) during the weight loss period to adjust the amount of calories fed to maintain a consistent rate of weight loss. It is common for pets just starting a program to need multiple weight checks to achieve the desired rate of loss. This period of adjustment is more common when a pet's diet history cannot be used for initial recommendations. This is why every attempt to determine a pet's current caloric intake is made prior to initiating a weight loss plan. Our clinic welcomes clients to stop by just to weigh their pets any time we are open.

Can the current food be used if attempting weight loss?

Since the amount of calories fed inherently must be reduced to result in weight loss, the volume of food will also need to be accordingly restricted if the pet's regular diet is to be used. Veterinarians usually do not use a pet's current food for weight loss, in part to avoid this reduction in volume. Smaller volumes do not distend the stomach as much and can lead to the feeling of hunger. Therefore most veterinarians initially choose to feed a special low-calorie diet designed for weight loss and not the pet's regular diet. Most of these diets contain fewer calories per cup or can than a typical maintenance diet or even an over-the-counter "light" pet food. Switching the diet allows a similar volume of food to be fed while still reducing the amount of calories that the dog or cat is receiving.

These special weight loss diets have another advantage over a typical diet- almost all have increased amounts of essential amino acids, fatty acids, vitamins, and minerals. Pets undergoing weight loss only need fewer calories; they do not need less essential nutrients. Feeding a typical maintenance diet in an amount necessary to cause weight loss places the animal at risk of developing multiple nutrient deficiencies. Pet food manufacturers design their food to contain a specific amount of a nutrient per calorie. If the amount of calories were to be reduced by 30%, then all of the nutrients are reduced by 30% as well. Although a small excess of each nutrient is added for safety, the restriction in calories necessary for weight loss most often exceeds this safety margin, causing a standard diet to become deficient. Therefore, diets designed for weight loss are often prescribed to ensure that the pets feel as full as possible, as well as to ensure their nutritional requirements are met.

A few diets designed for weight loss are not lower in calories but rather are lower in carbohydrates and higher in protein and fat to potentially change a pet's metabolism to utilize more fat. Your veterinarian will let you know if this type of diet is recommended.

What about treats?

An equally important component of a pet's diet is treats. Treats provide a pet with feedback that they are important members of the family. Accordingly, veterinarians will often strive to include some treats into a weight loss plan. Although any treat can generally be fed, treats should be limited to no more than 10% of a pet's daily caloric intake. This decreases the potential of creating a nutrient deficiency since treats are not complete and balanced foods.

It can be surprising how many calories some treats contain. For example, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter has the same number of calories as 3 cups of air-popped popcorn without butter. Many people with pets are also surprised to find out that pets will often eat lower-calorie treats equally as well as those containing more calories. The important part of the treat is not the food itself; it is the interaction between the pet and the owner. Therefore, most things that you present to the pet as a treat will be accepted as such. Try making treats smaller (but not giving more to make up for it!), giving raw vegetables as a treat,

and even trying ice cubes. If part of the problem is different family members giving treats at different times leading to an over abundance try this idea: Place a specific number of treats in an inexpensive reusable plastic container each day (for a total of no more than 10% of the daily calories). When this container is empty, it is a visual cue to all family members that no more treats are to be given for that day. Multiple pet households should have one container for each pet.

What about human food?

As a general rule, **pets should not be fed people food**. Like any rule, there are exceptions. An occasional (once daily or less) *small* (one bite) treat of human food will not hurt a pet. More often is acceptable if the food is wholesome such as lean, unprocessed (always cooked) meat, vegetables and complex carbohydrates. Pets that are receiving numerous treats of the same high-fat, high-salt, high-sugar, processed snacks that are making humans overweight are a problem, as well as pets that have been so spoiled on human food that they will not longer eat dog food. Pets that eat exclusively human food are usually not getting the proper balance of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals and are at risk for pancreatitis, kidney and liver problems, stomach upset, and (obviously) obesity. **Also keep in mind; some human foods are actually toxic to pets** such as chocolate, onions, and grapes.

If begging is a problem in your home it is because you have allowed begging to be a problem. **Begging is not a hunger problem, it is a behavior problem**. One strategy is to not allow the pets in the kitchen when food is being prepared or eaten. Another is to give them their own meal or treats or chew toys at that time so they are otherwise occupied. Or try simply ignoring them. They will eventually abandon behaviors that do not get them the desired results, but you must ignore them every single time they beg. Any positive reinforcement will perpetuate the behavior.

If you have a people food junkie in your home that refuses to eat their dog food you have two choices: 1. Find a way to successfully transition them to dog food or 2. Feed a home cooked diet balanced to meet their metabolic needs. Your veterinarian has recipes available if you elect to go with option #2. If you would rather feed a commercial diet there are several strategies for making the transition. Sometimes the owner simply hasn't waited long enough for the dog to eat its own food. No dog is going to actually starve itself in the presence of nutrition, so if they are still standing next to their dish full of untouched food waiting for you to give out the good stuff after three days, offer fresh dog food, and wait longer but do not give in. It is safe to do this for about a week as long as they continue to drink water. Sometimes it helps to start with canned food as this is more aromatic and usually more palatable than dry dog food. Or, try mixing canned dog food with people food in ever increasing quantities to get them used to it, and then you can begin mixing the canned food with dry to make that transition as well. If they are used to getting fed from the table and you do not plan to ban them from the kitchen during meals, place their dog food on the table and when they come begging, put it on the floor for them. Remember, you don't have to feel bad for wanting your pet to be healthy and they will not hold a grudge against you for making these changes.

Is exercise important?

An additional way to increase a pet's sense of being appreciated is to play or walk with them. This gives you positive interaction that is not food related. This also has the added benefit of providing the pet with much needed exercise during weight loss, which assists with the burning of fat and the increasing of muscle mass. The use of laser pointers and feather toys to encourage stalking and predatory behavior in cats can be very useful in increasing activity. For dogs, retrieving thrown objects or taking them on progressively longer walks can be an effective means of increasing activity. If your pet is not used to exercise, start slowly and build gradually.

Are there any “diet” drugs for pets?

There is a new weight loss drug for dogs only called Slentrol, the purpose of which is to decrease the absorption of fat in the pet's diet. This will only be used along with, not instead of, a committed diet and exercise program. Ask your veterinarian if your dog is a candidate.

How will I know if the weight loss plan is successful?

Many people wish to know what their pet's ultimate weight should be. Veterinarians are reluctant to provide a weight because it focuses on a number rather than a meaningful measure of the pet's health. Achieving an ideal body condition score and/or an improvement in health is a much more useful goal for most pets. For example, if a dog with arthritis that could barely walk around the block before weight loss is able to regain her ability to go on walks and play without as much pain, the program has been very successful regardless of the end weight. End weights can also be somewhat misleading as patients convert pounds of fat into pounds of muscle.

Weight loss plans end when the goals of the program have been achieved. This may in fact be a goal weight, but often that may be a body condition score or an improvement in a health problem. Regardless of the specific end point, a success should be celebrated, and the habits and behavior changes that achieved the weight loss should be retained for the rest of the pet's life.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact the clinic at the above telephone number.

1

20% below ideal body weight

Ribs easily felt with no fat cover



2

10% below ideal body weight

Bones raised with minimal tissue
between the skin and bone



3

Ideal body weight

Ribs can be felt through slight fat cover



4

10% above ideal body weight

Difficult to feel ribs through moderate fat cover. A slightly
sagging abdominal fat pad may be seen in cats



5

20% above ideal body weight

Ribs are difficult to feel under thick fat. Cats have a
prominent sagging abdominal fat pad

