

OBESITY IN OUR PETS

Courtesy of Omaha Vaccine Company

INTRODUCTION

Obesity has reached epidemic proportions in this country. It is now the most common nutritional problem we see in our pets. Close to 50% of all dogs are overweight and more than 20% of felines need to shed pounds. Older, indoor cats top all groups; some studies report obesity in 60% of these cats. Overweight pets are unhealthy. They face a variety of weight-related diseases, and a shorter, more painful life. But our pets do not decide when and how much they eat. As their owners, we control what they eat, when they exercise, and ultimately, their weight.

WHY OUR PETS ARE OVERWEIGHT

Our pets are truly members of our families; they act like us and follow our directions when it comes to minimizing exercise and maximizing diet. Our cats stay indoors and watch videos of birds. Our dogs sit by us as we watch TV and then take one five-minute walk before bedtime.

Most of our pets spend the majority of the day in a crate, or a pen, or the house, waiting for us. Because we don't have time to exercise and interact with our pets, we feel guilty. We limit our guilt by replacing attention with food. Fido looks sad because he is bored and lonely. So, we feed him. Then he looks sad again, so we feed him again. Soon our beloved Fido is one very obese dog.

The cat ends up overweight for other reasons. It is true that she also enjoys table scraps, cat treats, and napping with her owners, but the main cause of her obesity is her sedentary lifestyle. Outdoor cats and those house cats that are still allowed to roam outside typically do not get fat. It is cats that are left indoors that suffer from boredom and lack of exercise. Their boredom leads to overeating, especially if highly palatable foods are available all day, free choice. Imagine being stuck indoors, forever. Your appetite will not decrease with your lack of exercise, but increase as you search for ways to fill the endless hours. So it is with indoor cats, left alone all day with nothing to do but eat, and gain weight.

Although insufficient exercise and excess calorie consumption are the major causes of obesity, there are other factors that can contribute to a pet's weight gain. High quality pet foods have high fat levels that can rapidly add on the pounds. There are also some breeds of dogs, such as Labrador retrievers, beagles, and basset hounds, that tend to gain weight easily. Other pets suffer from medical conditions, such as hypothyroidism, that can lead to weight gain. And, as with people, older animals usually need fewer calories to maintain weight. Finally, spayed and neutered pets do have a predisposition to gain weight more easily than their intact counterparts.

Breed type, age, and reproductive status are not an excuse for uncontrolled weight gain. They simply influence your pet's tendency to add pounds and should be taken into consideration in a weight management program. The bottom line is that most of our pets are overweight because they eat too much and exercise too little. It is up to you to make sure that their dietary needs match their physical status. So, if your older dog is arthritic and does not want to exercise, you must intervene and help with joint supplements, pain medications, and appropriate diet and exercise plans. And, if your spayed cat tends to gain weight, it is your job to make sure she increases her exercise and changes her dietary habits to suit her altered physiology.

WHY AN OVERWEIGHT PET IS UNHEALTHY

Our need to confine our pets and over-feed them may feel like love, but it is not. The combination creates a very unhealthy situation. Obese animals can have a number of weight related illnesses. There is extra stress on the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, and other body organs. So fat animals are more likely to suffer from cardiac disease, respiratory problems, digestive disorders, and high blood pressure. Their joints, ligaments, tendons, and bones suffer from excess wear and tear, so they endure arthritis, joint injuries, leg problems, and back ailments. They are at greater risk during anesthesia and surgery. Overheating, skin disease, and reproductive problems are common complaints. Obese animals are prone to life threatening chronic diseases such as diabetes, Cushing's disease, pancreatitis, and liver disease, including feline hepatic lipodosis.

As the pet ages, these physical problems increase and the quality of life decreases. The animals have difficulty rising, walking, climbing stairs, running, and lying down. They are more prone to develop fatty

tumors. These tumors can interfere with motion and make the animals even more uncomfortable. In general, obese pets lead shorter, less comfortable lives than those kept at the proper weight.

HOW TO DETERMINE IF YOUR PET IS OVERWEIGHT

Breed type and body structure should be taken into consideration when determining ideal body weight. In general, the best way to tell if your dog is overweight is to examine the dog. Start by looking at the dog from the side as he stands. You should be able to see good definition between the rib cage and the abdominal area. If you cannot tell where the ribs end and the abdomen begins, your dog is most likely overweight.

The most accurate method uses touch. While the dog is standing, place your hands on both sides of the rib cage. If you can just feel the dog's ribs, your dog is within the optimal weight range. A dog within his normal weight range should have a thin layer of fat over the ribs. If you can actually put your fingers between each rib, the dog is too thin. If you cannot feel the ribs, your dog is fat. The more overweight the dog becomes, the heavier the layer of fat will feel. Fat can also be present along the back, over the hips, and over the abdomen.

It may be more difficult to decide if your cat is overweight, in that looks are often deceiving. Heavily furred cats or those with excess hanging skin may appear to be obese, when they are not. Feeling the cat may be a better indicator of body mass. In general, cats should have a sleek appearance, without a huge belly or pads of fat on their hips.

TREATING THE OVERWEIGHT PET

All overweight animals should have a veterinary examination before starting treatment. Treatment is designed for gradual, long-term weight reduction. It combines changes in lifestyle for both the pet and the owner. The entire family must be involved in the process so that a member with no will power does not undermine the program by sneaking treats to the pet. The basis of treatment is reduction in unnecessary calories and an increase in exercise. Simply feeding less food or low calorie food is typically not the answer. The pet usually does not lose weight and low fat diets fed long-term can result in both skin and internal problems.

Before beginning, document the calories that your pet consumes. Calories can be found in the pet's regular food, as well as treats, biscuits, table scraps, chews, gravies, and coat supplements. Compare this to the calorie total that your veterinarian recommends for your pet. Next, document the exercise that your pet receives. Sitting in the backyard is not exercise. Walking, running, fetching, and swimming are exercising, as are playing with other dogs, catching a ball, and chasing a flying disc.

Document the pet's weight before starting the life style changes. Weekly weigh-ins can tell you if the animal and you are on track, or if further modifications are needed.

TIPS TO REDUCE CALORIES

1. Eliminate table scraps. They are typically high in fat and calories
2. Learn to ignore "begging eyes." This will eventually diminish the behavior.
3. Learn to ignore vocal complaints and toe-bites from frustrated felines.
4. Replace your need to give treats as a sign of love. Instead, give your pet a massage, a walk, some obedience work, or other attention, instead of food.
5. Slightly reduce the amount of commercial food you are feeding. Your veterinarian can tell you if the food is appropriate and the amount to feed your pet. Cut back approximately 15% of the ration. Reduction in food can result in deficiencies of vital nutrients, so consult your veterinarian before simply reducing the amount of food.
6. Measure the food at each meal for accuracy.
7. Consider a "diet food". Available as prescription products, or from your local store, these products are traditionally lower in fat and higher in fiber. They allow the pet to consume the same volume of food with fewer calories. Some of the newer diet foods are high in protein and low in carbohydrates. Not all animals can digest these diet foods. Any changes in diet should be made gradually over one to two weeks. Ask your veterinarian for advice.
8. Feed smaller portions more often. If your pet is usually fed once per day, switching to two, three or even four smaller feedings can actually reduce calories and help the animal feel full.

9. Weigh your pet regularly so that you know if your plan is working. Aim for a gradual weight reduction of approximately 1% of the pet's body weight per week. Most animals can lose between 0.5% and at most, 2% of their body weight per week. A large dog may be able to tolerate up to a loss of 1½ pounds per week. Rapid weight loss is dangerous, especially for cats. Cats that lose weight too rapidly can suffer from hepatic lipidosis, a life-threatening disease.
10. If you have other pets, separate the dieting one during feeding. This reduces competition and the urge to eat more.
11. Keep water available at all times.
12. Eliminate free-choice feeding of dry foods and do not leave canned food out for more than a few minutes at each feeding.
13. Be patient. It may take several months for a pet to lose needed weight.

TIPS FOR HEALTHY EXERCISE

1. Exercising a pet involves you. Most pets will not exercise by themselves. They may play with another animal or entertain themselves briefly with toys, but as their constant companion and guardian, it is your job to direct exercise play and keep your pet active.
2. Keep exercise simple and moderate. Over-exercising an obese animal can cause more harm than good. DO NOT place excess strain on the pet's already stressed cardiac, respiratory, and musculo-skeletal system. Watch an overweight animal for signs of fatigue, and stop exercise if necessary.
3. As a dog adapts to the exercise and weight loss starts to occur, the amount and intensity of exercise can be gradually increased. Start with two easy, short walks per day. Five to fifteen minutes each walk may be enough for the obese dog. Slowly increase to two or three 30 minute, brisk walks per day.
4. Provide water every few minutes for the dog to help prevent overheating.
5. Utilize joint-friendly activities such as swimming.
6. Play games, such as fetch, catch, or Frisbee.
7. Allow play with other dogs, if appropriate.
8. Increase your household activities and let the pets join in. The more you walk around the house, the more the pets will walk, if invited.
9. As your dog starts to feel better and lose weight, jogging can help accelerate the weight loss process.
10. Consider exercising and playing in group activities, such as agility training.
11. Exercise your pet every single day.
12. Do not assume that walking a cat with a harness is exercising; it is not. Cats on a leash tend to meander at their own pace, wherever the whim takes them. It is a nice way to get fresh air, but not a method to burn calories.
13. Cats can chase Ping-Pong balls, wadded-up paper, rubber balls, or remote-controlled toys. They enjoy attacking feathers on poles or other commercially available toys. Be creative, and think like a cat to create toys for your pet.
14. A little catnip can help bring out the kitten in your cat and increase playtime activities.

FAT LOSS SUPPLEMENTS

At the present time, there are no oral products designed to help cats shed excess pounds. There are studies in dogs which show that the cautious use of some dietary supplements can help dogs reduce weight and lower their cholesterol levels. These studies were done in obese dogs that were not helped by reduced-calorie diets alone. The dogs lost weight when they were given a naturally occurring hormone called dehydroepiandrosterone, or DHEA. DHEA levels decrease in animals as they age. Replacing the lost DHEA can lead to an increase in fat metabolism and subsequent weight loss.

Other supplements that are presently being studied include L-carnitine, a nutrient needed for fat metabolism, garcinia cambogia, a fruit that appears to slow the formation of fat in the body, chitosan, a fat-trapping product that reduces absorption of fat from the digestive tract, and metabolism enhancers such as chromium picolinate. It is a good idea to check with your veterinarian before using fat loss supplements for your pet.

CONCLUSION

Our pets are members of our family. We love them and want to keep them safe and healthy. To do this, we must keep them fit, not fat. So the next time your pet wants to play and you want to watch television,

remind yourself that a healthy pet is an active pet. Put down the potato chips, get off the couch, and go exercise with your best friend!

Sincerely,
Dr. Jane Leon