

Pudgy Pooches and Fat Cats: Pet Obesity

It seems like there are more and more studies coming out about childhood obesity, news stories describing the country's "most overweight state", and cities going so far as to consider banning soft drinks in schools. With all this focus on healthy weight management, it's important that we don't forget our furry family members.

According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, an estimated 54% of dogs and cats in the US are overweight or obese. That's 93 million animals that could stand to lose a little around their middle.

Even a few extra pounds can put your dog or cat at risk for some serious medical conditions such as osteoarthritis, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and even cancer. The lifespan for obese pets is statistically less than those of normal weight.

How Do I Know My Pet is Overweight?

Veterinarians use a grading system called a "Body Condition Score" or BCS. The most common system by Purina rates dogs and cats on a scale of 1 through 9. A score of 5 would be just right, a grade of 3 would be quite thin, and a grade of 7 or 8 indicates some weight loss needed. The extreme value of 1 would represent an emaciated pet. This scoring system allows your veterinarian to monitor changes in your pet as you work to achieve a healthy weight. The next time you have your pet seen at your veterinary clinic, ask the doctor to tell you your pet's Body Condition Score!

If you don't have a visit to the veterinarian on the agenda, you can still determine if your pet is fit and trim. Your pet is probably at a healthy weight if his ribs are easily felt, his stomach doesn't sag, and his waistline is easily seen from above. He or she may be overweight if it is difficult to feel ribs under a layer of fat, there is no visible waistline, or the tummy sags. Let's face it, if you can grab a handful of fat, your pet probably needs to slim down.



We've Grown Accustomed to Pudgy

Certain breeds of dog and cat will have a tendency to become fat due to their physical build and metabolism. You would expect a slow-moving bulldog to be plumper than an active border collie. I have a Persian cat, and with his heavy coat, sometimes it is hard for me to tell what's fat and what's fur. A fluffy winter coat might be hiding a fluffy fold of fat.

Another problem is that we see our pets every day and may just not recognize that they've put on a few pounds. In the US we trend toward chunky when it comes to our companions. In fact, it is not uncommon for pet owners to point to their dog and say "He seems a little thin to me," when the dog is at a perfectly healthy weight and body condition.

Helping Your Pet Lose Weight

Just like with people, it's important to work closely with your veterinarian before beginning any serious weight loss program for your pet. The doctor will want to rule out medical conditions that could be causing the obesity. Thyroid issues are a common culprit, but certain medications can also put your pet at higher risk. Together you and your veterinarian will determine an ideal weight and a good plan for losing the weight gradually. Weight loss that happens too quickly can lead to serious health issues, too.

Once your veterinarian rules out medical issues, the key to controlling your pet's weight is simple: diet and exercise.

It's hard to resist those big brown eyes begging for your pizza crusts or that insistent paw patting you for the milk in the bottom of your cereal bowl. It's time to be strong! The first key to helping your pet "diet" is simply to measure out the food you are feeding. Most guardians are surprised to discover they are feeding a lot more than they think that they are. If your pet is exceptionally overweight, your veterinarian may recommend a prescription weight-loss food which can help. Cutting back on the kibble may be all that you need to do!

Don't forget that treats have calories too, so watch how many "snacks" your pet is receiving. If necessary, you can count out a certain number of dog biscuits to dole out through the day. Or, change to a lower calorie reward. Dogs usually like green beans and this is a zero calorie way to help them feel full.

Exercise is important and can be fun for you and your pet! A brisk walk daily may be fine to control the weight for a pug, but your active retriever may need an hour at the park with a tennis ball in order to stay fit. There are so many choices from squeaky toys to laser pointers, if you can get your dog to chase; you're way ahead of the game. Switch things up so you and your pet don't get bored. Tailor the exercise to the pet. You can exercise your feline friend with feather sticks, wind-up mice, or laser pointers. Making a game out of exercise also helps increase the bond between you and your pet, which is a wonderful bonus.

Weigh In! Track your progress along the way and reward yourself and your pet for your successes. By checking in throughout the weight-loss program, you will know what's working and what isn't.

For more information about Pet Obesity, consider visiting the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention at www.petobesityprevention.com There you will find printable weight loss tools such as calorie charts, ideal weight ranges, and exercise ideas for your pet.

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