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Weight Problems Don't Stop At Two Legs, Say Vets

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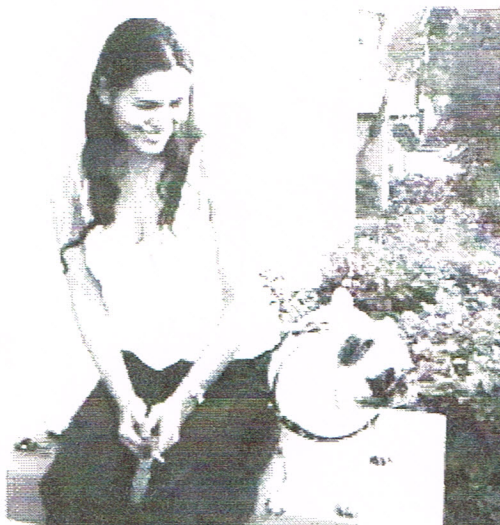


Photo by: DARYL UMBERGER/South Tampa News

Ty Fuenmayor, an attorney who lives in Hyde Park, sits in front of her apartment with Sniffs, her Pug. Fuenmayor is not alone among pet owners trying to get their animals to shed a few pounds.

Is a lawsuit bearing the name of someone's pet golden retriever against one of the dog treat manufacturers far behind?

National reports last month warned of an obesity epidemic - only the weight problem being mentioned belonged to our dogs and cats, not us for once.

Depending on the definition of what overweight is, some figures place the number of cats and dogs with a weight problem at 50 percent.

The image of a couch potato Fido would be humorous, if animals weren't affected by the same health risks that affect overweight people.

Extra weight puts pets at risk for a variety of health concerns, including diabetes, osteoarthritis, heart disease, and high blood pressure, among others.

And local veterinarians say that the weight epidemic among pets here in dog-walking South Tampa mirrors the national trend.

No. 1 Issue

Although the definitions of overweight vary, South Tampa veterinarians agree that they see a lot of it.

``That is the number one nutritional issue that veterinarians treat today is overweight, or obese, pets," said Dr. Eddie Garcia, who practices at 4241 Henderson Blvd.

Garcia estimates between 35 and 55 percent of the pets he sees have weight problems. What's considered overweight depends on the breed and the size of the animal -- for instance, smaller dog breeds that should be at 10-12 pounds are sometimes carrying between 18-20 pounds. At a minimum, that's 50 percent more than what their ideal weight should be.

``I can recollect a couple of cats that were so obese, they couldn't get around to clean themselves," Garcia said.

Over at the Hyde Park Veterinary Clinic, on 1111 Swann Ave., Dr. Shelley Harper says she sees a lot of overweight pets, too.

``In my estimation, 70 percent are overweight and 30 percent obese," Harper said. ``I would call a dog overweight if it was three pounds over. It's easier to nip the problem in the bud by cutting back food when the dog is only a couple of pounds overweight."

Otherwise, she said, scaling back a dog that is 10 pounds overweight can be `a one- to two-year project,' because obese dogs risk overexertion or heat stroke if they start rigorous exercise too soon.

Big Meals

Like the way our own restaurant portions have ballooned in the past few years, that distortion can carry over to the way we feed our pets.

We forget to scale things down to pet size, say vets, and when we hear about an extra two pounds on our dog or cat, it doesn't sound all that alarming.

``A pet carrying an extra three to four pounds is like us carrying an extra 15 to 20 (pounds)," said Garcia.

Just as a half bag of potato chips might seem like a snack when, in reality, a serving size is 10 chips, pet owners must keep portions in mind for their pets too.

``Nutritionally, the foods are better, they meet their caloric needs, and people feed them a lot more than they should, or need," Garcia said. ``Most snacks that you buy over the counter, when you feed your pet these 4-5 times a day, it equals another cup of food."

Changing Habits

For Ty Fuenmayor, 27, who lives in Hyde Park and works as an attorney downtown, getting Sniffs, her soon-to-be 4-year-old Pug, to drop a couple pounds is a preventative measure.

``You want them to live a long life and be with you as long as they can," Fuenmayor said.

Sniffs, who is two pounds over her average weight, has the breathing problems that are common to most Pugs. When the dogs become overheated, their problems with breathing can become exacerbated. That means Fuenmayor needs to plan Sniffs' exercise around the summer months before it gets too hot.

She feeds Sniffs diet dog food, and has replaced her dog treats with baby carrots. Of the two, she

said, Sniffs prefers the carrots over the diet food.

Getting enough exercise, though, is not the problem for Sniffs. Fuenmayor moved to Tampa from Miami last year, and specifically chose Hyde Park for one reason -- it reminded her of South Beach where folks were always walking their dogs.

What Sniffs appears to be a victim of is her own charms, because, said Fuenmayor, she is very social and has a face that people find hard to resist. And that means Sniffs gets her fair share of handouts.

On the days when Fuenmayor goes out of town, she takes her dog to her mother's or her aunt's home to stay.

They, in turn, had problems resisting their four-legged houseguest.

``She gets spoiled because they can't resist her and feed her egg sandwiches," Fuenmayor said.

Bringing Sniffs' weight down has been a project fought on the human front, more than on the canine one. At first, Fuenmayor didn't have much luck getting her mom and her aunt to change the way they fed her dog.

Then, when she pointed out how unfair it was for Sniffs to switch back to diet food after she got home, her mother understood, she said. As for her aunt, well, Fuenmayor said that she had to tell a little white lie that involved Sniffs and a high cholesterol problem.

Taking Steps

The first thing a pet owner can do is to discuss their pet's weight with their veterinarian, said Garcia, and ask them to go back and look at the animal's weight over the past year.

If there is a problem, diet foods are available over-the-counter or by prescription. They have between 10 to 50 percent fewer calories, with prescription brands at the high end of the range.

And exercise? There's no excuse not to, even if a dog park is not close by, say vets.

``You don't have to throw a Frisbee or have them go over hurdles," Garcia said. ``All you have to do is take them for a walk around the block a couple of times."

But take heart, South Tampa. Harper formerly practiced more than seven years in Tarpon Springs, and saw more obese pets there.

``Whether it's because there's more condo living or smaller backyards, I'm not sure," Harper said. ``I see more people in South Tampa walking their dogs."

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