

FROM HEFTY TO HEALTHY

Understanding Pet Obesity

Pet obesity is a growing problem (no pun intended) in the United States. Data from Nationwide, the largest provider of pet health insurance in the country,¹ reveals that the number of obese pets has increased every year for the past 6 years, and this trend shows no signs of abating. The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention notes that nearly 59% of cats (that's about 50.5 million) and 54% of dogs (nearly 42 million) in America are too heavy for their own good.²

What harm can pudginess in a pet cause? Quite a bit, it turns out. Excess weight can lead to a number of diseases, including arthritis, liver disease, and diabetes, among others. As the health of our overweight pets declines, the cost of veterinary care increases and quality of life decreases. So, why are so many pets overweight, and what can pet owners do about it?

WHY ARE PETS PUTTING ON THE POUNDS?

Just like in people, overfeeding and lack of exercise are the 2 biggest culprits when it comes to weight gain in pets. Many pet owners love to show their affection by showering Fluffy and Fido with love in the form of treats, but this generosity often leads to obesity. Treats should make up only 10% of your pet's recommended caloric intake.

Likewise, your pet relies on you for exercise. If you don't take your pet for regular walks, play games of fetch, and participate in other forms of physical activity, it will be difficult for him to maintain a healthy weight.

Just as weight gain can lead to the onset of disease in dogs and cats, certain diseases can also contribute to pet weight gain. Animals with arthritis or asthma, for example, likely find it difficult to exercise for any sustained period. Because these diseases can deter pets from being active, they need to be treated properly.

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THE MOST COMMON OBESITY-RELATED CONDITIONS

DOGS

Arthritis
Bladder/urinary tract disease
Low thyroid hormone production
Liver disease
Torn knee ligaments
Diseased disk in the spine
Chronic kidney disease
Heart failure
Fatty growth

CATS

Bladder/urinary tract disease
Chronic kidney disease
Diabetes
Asthma
Liver disease
Arthritis
Heart failure
Gallbladder disorder
Immobility of the spine

Source: prnewswire.com/news-releases/pet-obesity-on-the-rise-for-sixth-straight-year-300385293.html



Obese and overweight pets are now so common that many pet owners think having a plump pet is normal. And, because they don't see the potential harm, they often don't take any steps to help their pet lose weight.

HOW CAN YOU TELL IF YOUR PET IS OVERWEIGHT?

Veterinarians visually grade a pet's weight using body condition scoring. While these scores are subjective, they can help you understand whether your pet is overweight and whether a modified diet and exercise plan are in order (see details below).

Certain breeds of cats and dogs are more predisposed to obesity as well, simply due to their genetic makeup. Dog breeds that are prone to weight gain include Labrador retrievers, Cairn terriers, cocker spaniels, pugs, Pekingese, and bulldogs. Feline breeds that easily put on the pounds include Maine coons, Manx cats, and Russian blues.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

If you think your pet is too plump or may be predisposed to obesity, talk to your veterinarian about diet and nutrition. A modified nutritional plan should be used in conjunction with an overall plan to give fewer treats and get your pet more active. Try to incorporate these tips and tricks into your pet's daily routine.

- Reward your pet with scratches or belly rubs instead of treats. You can also reward with fun instead of food, such as a game of fetch or a trip to the dog park.

- When it comes to exercising a sedentary pet, the goal should be 15 minutes of strenuous activity twice daily. But, you'll need to work up to this slowly. Start by adding a few minutes to your morning and evening walks, or pick up the pace of the walk over a few weeks.
- Try swimming as an alternative to walking. Low-impact exercise such as swimming might be an easier option for obese pets. Ask your veterinarian about hydrotherapy or underwater treadmills and whether they might be a good option for your pet.
- Provide climbing structures for your indoor cat. Cats enjoy being elevated, and these structures offer an easy way for them to get moving.

It's easier to get your pet up and moving if you get yourself up and moving right by her side. When you make a plan and stick to it, life will be healthier and happier for both of you. ■

References

1. Pet obesity on the rise for sixth straight year [press release]. Cision PR Newswire website. prnewswire.com/news-releases/pet-obesity-on-the-rise-for-sixth-straight-year-300385293.html. Published January 4, 2017. Accessed August 2, 2017.
2. U.S. pets get fatter, owners disagree with veterinarians on nutritional issues. Association for Pet Obesity Prevention website. petobesityprevention.org/2016-u-s-pet-obesity-statistics/. Published February 20, 2017. Accessed August 2, 2017.



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BODY CONDITION SCORING

Here are the basics of a 5-point body condition score scale:

1. **Very thin/emaciated:** Pet's ribs, spine, and hips are very visible; no discernible body fat.
2. **Thin:** Pet's ribs are easily felt and may be visible; waist and "abdominal tuck" (area behind ribs smaller than chest) obvious.
3. **Ideal weight:** Pet's ribs can be felt but not seen; obvious waist.
4. **Overweight:** Ribs not easily seen or felt; visible areas of fat.
5. **Obese:** Pet's ribs can be felt only with heavy pressure; no waist or abdominal tuck; abdomen distended.

