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Veterinary newsletter

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Is my dog overweight?

Maintaining a healthy weight is essential for your dog's continued vitality and energy - but how do you know when its weight is becoming an issue?

In industrialised countries, multiple studies have shown that at least one in every five dogs is obese. This likelihood of obesity in dogs can lead to increased risk of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and arthritis, as well as many other chronic conditions. Therefore, monitoring your dog's weight and recognising when they may be overweight is crucial in making sure they don't suffer from poor health.

How can I tell if my dog is overweight?

The first step to understanding whether your dog is overweight is a preventative one. By weighing them regularly, recording their weight, and attending check-ups with your vet, you'll get a clearer picture of their weight gain or loss over their lifetime. Your vet will be able to tell you your dog's ideal weight, based on its sex, breed and age. If your dog is between 15% and 20% over its ideal weight, it's classified as obese. As an example, a dog whose ideal weight is 50kg would be considered obese if it weighed 60kg.

A simple test you can do at home to work out whether your dog is overweight or obese is to try to feel its ribs through its fur and body tissue. If you can feel its ribs but they're not prominent, your dog is a healthy weight. If it's impossible for you to find and feel its ribs, then your dog is overweight.



How do overweight dogs behave?

You might also recognise your dog is overweight from a change in its behaviour. It might be lethargic and lack energy, including a lack of effort when it comes to playing games or taking physical activity. When you take your dog on walks, it may become breathless very easily or even stop attempting to walk altogether, because it's either in pain or tired. You'll also, naturally, see their physical size increase. Your dog may exhibit particular poor behaviours around food, such as over-eating, begging for scraps, whining for treats or acting aggressively towards you at mealtimes. When establishing a weight loss plan for your dog, your vet will ask how you feed your dog and what you feed it; it's important to answer honestly, as sometimes owners can inadvertently be contributing to their dog's obesity through giving it snacks, too many treats, or leftovers.



Obesity and being overweight is a real and pressing issue among dogs, but it can be treated with the right diet and behaviour. Make sure to attend regular check-ups with your vet to monitor your dog's weight, as well as speaking to them if you notice any of the behaviours which could indicate obesity.

How can obese pets be prevented from eating other pets' food?

Feeding cats in elevated locations or inside a “creep feeder” (**FIGURE 1**) can keep obese dogs from eating cat food. Multicat households are challenging, but a creep feeder can also be used to separate lean cats and kittens from obese cats for feeding. In this situation, the feeder opening must be large enough for a thin cat to enter and exit but too small to admit an obese cat. All leftover pet food should be removed from accessible locations.



Figure 1.

Creep feeder constructed from a plastic storage box for feeding cats in a multipet household. An entrance was made by cutting the hole in the side wall of the storage box (*upper left*). The top lid of the box was removed for this photograph.



Figure 2.

A labyrinth-type feeder bowl can slow down a gutsy eater and make them feel more satisfied with their portion size.

and

Overweight? Ways to tip the scales in the right direction

Is your pooch a bit round? Is your cat wider than it is tall? They are not alone. It is estimated that 1 in 3 of dogs and cats in New Zealand are overweight.

Most overweight pets simply eat too much—we are loving our pets to death! Occasionally weight gain is due to a medical problem but most are overweight due to the amount they eat. It has become even more of a problem since we have been home more often due to COVID restrictions and therefore have been feeding more treats and food to reduce anxiety. As with people, overweight animals can have health issues such as high blood pressure, diabetes and arthritis. To help keep your pet looking—and feeling—good, here are a few tips:

Begin with the rib test. To tell if your pet is overweight or just solid, run your hand along its side. You should be able to feel the ribs without too much pressure applied. If not, you know it's time to trim their weight.

Put on your walking shoes. Regular exercise is probably one of the best ways to help your pet shed excess weight. It's also a great way to bond with your dog. Start out with short walks and work up to longer, more active adventures. With your cat, you can play at home to encourage exercise.

Make it light. To help slim down, you can switch food to a lite version. This allows the amount eaten to stay the same but weight will be lost. Or another option is to reduce the amount you feed by about a quarter. Measuring out the daily allowance and only feeding from that allowance will help reduce the extras fed.

Feed more often. You can divide the daily food allowance into several servings to help stave off hunger pangs while dieting and reduce the scavenging desire. You can also use bowls that are designed to slow down the rate of eating to make the meal last longer and feel more filling.

Stop the snacks and treats. However tempting it may be to slip a little extra, remind yourself that these are extra calories he is better off without. If you must give treats, take some from the daily allowance so these are not extras.



Guard against theft. Pets can be very sneaky at finding and stealing food when they are dieting. Keep the rubbish out of their reach, keep an eye on your table and don't leave anything out that they can steal when you aren't looking.

Be prepared for the backlash. No-one enjoys dieting. Your pet may whine, look at you with those hungry eyes, hassle you every time you go to the fridge. Be strong! Your mate's health is at risk and you can do something about it.

How to help your cat lose weight

An increasing number of the cat population around the world are considered obese, and suffer from a range of long-term health problems. Here's how to help your cat lose weight and start living a healthier lifestyle.

The right diet to help your cat lose weight



A weight loss diet for your cat focuses on three general principles: reducing the amount of calories they ingest, managing the feeling of hunger during the diet, and adapting the amount of essential nutrients to balance the whole formula. This helps ensure your cat is properly fed with a balanced diet, feels full and satiated, and significantly reduces the level of energy provided. Just feeding your cat less of their regular food is not an effective way of facilitating weight loss. In some cases it can even be hazardous to the cat, since this will result in the cat missing out on essential nutrients.

A dedicated weight-loss diet should typically have a higher protein content than the cat's usual food, to help maintain muscle mass and compensate the restriction of portion

sizes, a low amount of fat and a high mineral and vitamin content. This diet can also promote active nutrients to support healthy joint mobility, as well as skin and coat condition.

Setting up the right feeding behaviour for your cat

To make sure your cat loses weight, it's essential you follow the recommended quantities on their food packaging, or as per the recommendations given by your vet, and use kitchen scales to weight the exact amount. Depending on the specific formula, dry foods which are commonly given to cats may be very energy rich, meaning it may be easier to over-feed your pet. Due to this, using scales and keeping to the guidelines is the best way to successfully manage a successful weight-loss programme.

Your vet will be able to advise you on the ideal rate of weight loss for your cat, but it shouldn't be too rapid. If this happens, your cat's body can believe it is malnourished which can lead to serious liver problems.

Getting your cat to exercise and lose weight

Depending on your cat's weight, it may be difficult for them to play to start with. However, by introducing play gradually into their daily routine, you'll be helping them exercise and burn off excess calories.

You can encourage your cat to be active by setting up your home so there's plenty for it to play with. Give your pet a climbing tree or multi-level area where they can jump and perch, as well as toys which it can play with while you are out – food toys, where your cat can access food through playing with an object, are fun and encourage their natural hunting instincts. Two play sessions of two minutes a day is a good start for an overweight cat; these can gradually increase as your cat becomes more mobile.

