

Weight: The Struggle is Real



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There is an epidemic of overweight and obese pets in the United States. Both cats and dogs are affected with some studies showing as many as 50% of animals in the overweight/obese category. Obesity in dogs and cats is defined by an animal's weight $\geq 20\%$ above ideal body weight. An animal is overweight if weight is $>10-19\%$ than ideal body weight. Most often, owners underestimate the weight and body condition of their pet so it is a very important topic. Owners also tend to equate food with love so it can be hard to resist overfeeding your pet.

Just as in people, obesity occurs from an imbalance between energy intake and energy expenditure. It is considered a chronic, inflammatory disease. Obesity can be further complicated by metabolic changes that contribute to insulin resistance, inflammation, and abnormal appetite control. This then leads to a change in metabolic rate, fat accumulation in abdominal organs, and altered lipid metabolism. It can become a vicious cycle that can be hard to get under control and ultimately can lead to numerous medical conditions that adversely affect the health and possibly the longevity of your pet.

Why do some dogs seem more prone to being overweight? Genetics can play a role. There are some endocrine diseases such as hypothyroidism or Cushing's disease that can lead to obesity. Often home dynamics can inadvertently lead to dogs being overfed. For example, if there are children in the home, they often love to give treats to their pet and those extra calories can add up fast. And sometimes it can simply be that the wrong size measuring cup is being used or owners have just not thought to use the package feeding guideline recommendations and just "fill the bowl."

What are some consequences of extra weight?

In dogs, obesity is known to contribute to and exacerbate [joint degeneration and osteoarthritis](#). Obese dogs are at higher risk for cranial cruciate ligament rupture, intervertebral disk disease, and exacerbating hip dysplasia. Weight loss alone can



improve the quality of life of arthritic pets and possibly even eliminate the need for some pain medications.

In both dogs and cats, obesity leads to insulin resistance, but the link between obesity and diabetes mellitus has only been proven in cats. The extra fat cells release inflammatory mediators that contribute to the development of insulin resistance and impaired glucose metabolism in cells. Obese cats have been found to have a 50% decrease in insulin sensitivity. Though diabetes can be managed, it can be a difficult disease to control as well as drastically impact both you and your pet's quality of life.

Both dogs and cats can have breathing difficulties due to obesity. The extra fat that accumulates around the chest not only can make the mechanical action of breathing more difficult, it can also lead to overheating and temperature regulation control. Tracheal collapse is one condition that is harder to control in obese dogs than in their normal weight counterparts.

Sadly, the lifespan of your pet can be decreased due to obesity. A study in Labrador retrievers found that dogs fed to a lean body condition lived about 2 years longer than those in the overweight/obese category. Similarly, a study in 8-12 year old cats found a 2.8 fold increase in mortality in obese cats compared to lean cats.

What can I do to help prevent a weight problem in my pet?

First, it is best to start with a visit with your veterinarian so they can thoroughly evaluate your pet for any underlying medical conditions. Your vet can assess your pet's weight and give your pet a body condition score. Your vet can also discuss with you what food you are feeding, how much your pet is being fed, your pet's activity level and any other husbandry issues that might play a role in weight management. Sometimes it is just a matter of learning how to measure your pet's food, feeding in meals instead of grazing, being careful with treats and ensuring adequate daily activity. It would also be best to devote one person in the household to managing feeding to avoid miscommunication and extra meals being fed. But just as with people, it can sometimes be hard to achieve weight loss in your pet. There are veterinary prescription diets that are available for more severe cases. Your veterinarian can help advise the best option for your pet as well as give feeding guidelines. Regular weigh-ins can also be a tool to help you stay on target and monitor progress for weight loss. Interactive toys can be used as feeding tools. These can help your pet burn a few calories while eating and also provide some intellectual stimulation.

Weight loss and weight management for your pet is an important topic and one that affects many of our companion animals. You should not feel alone or ashamed if your pet is overweight. Please reach out to your veterinarian and we can help establish a weight loss plan and help support you and your pet through the process. Weight loss is doable and your pet will be healthier because of it!