

OBESITY IN CATS AND DOGS

Obesity is the most common nutritional disorder of dogs and cats. It is estimated that 25-44% of dogs and up to 40% of cats seen by veterinarians are obese. There are 2 types of diets that can help control and/or maintain weight. Store bought diets include less active, senior and light foods. Prescription diets are available through veterinarians and are even more calorie restricted than the store bought diets. These can be an important nutritional aid to weight reduction and can play a significant role in helping maintain or decrease a pet's weight. Purina recently completed a 14-year study proving that lean dogs live longer. In this study with a group of Labrador Retrievers the average life span of the lean dogs was almost 2 years longer than the dogs that were allowed to eat all they wanted.

What is obesity? Obesity is defined as an excessive accumulation of body fat due to the intake of more dietary energy (calories) than the body needs. An animal may be considered obese if it weighs at least 20% more than its ideal body weight due to excess body fat. Obesity is often associated with increased risk of adverse effects on health and longevity.

Diagnosing your pet's condition: There are some guidelines you can use to help determine if your pet weighs more than it should. In general, if your dog or cat weighs 15-20% more than it did as a young healthy adult, it may be obese. Another way to check your pet is to run your hands along its sides. You should readily be able to feel your pet's ribs. If you can't, or if you suspect that your dog or cat weighs too much, it is important to consult with your veterinarian for advice about putting your pet on a weight reduction program. A complete physical exam will help to rule out medical problems that mimic or cause obesity. The exam also helps your veterinarian diagnose other health problems that your pet may have as a result of obesity. In some cases, laboratory tests and even radiographs are needed to evaluate your pet's condition.

Understanding obesity: Obesity occurs when more calories are consumed than the body uses. The excess calories are stored as fat. Individual animals vary greatly in the amount of food they require to maintain their body weight. Some of the factors which influence your pet's weight are physical activity, diet, genetics, and metabolic rate.

- *Physical activity:* Dogs and cats which are often idle, bored or inactive expend less energy and require fewer calories than active pets. Activity levels tend to decrease with age.
- *Diet:* Some dogs and cats consume too much food if they are offered an unlimited or excessive amount of any diet. In addition, most table scraps and treats are high in calories and can cause weight gain.
- *Genetics:* Some breeds of dogs such as Labrador Retrievers, Pugs, Beagles, Cocker Spaniels, and Dachshunds appear to be more at risk for obesity, which suggests a genetic factor. In man, genetics has also been shown to play a role in obesity.
- *Metabolic Rate:* Individual animals expend energy differently. Just as different machines vary in how efficiently they use energy, individual animals can vary greatly in how they expend energy. Therefore, some highly efficient animals may gain weight despite normal calorie intake.

Health concerns: Obesity is associated with many health conditions; including heart conditions, respiratory problems, endocrine (hormone) imbalances, and musculoskeletal disorders.

- *Heart:* Obesity increases the workload on the heart, which can aggravate cardiovascular problems.
- *Respiratory:* Obese dogs and cats may have shortness of breath, can be easily fatigued, and may have difficulty breathing after exercise.

- *Endocrine:* Obesity may be associated with Diabetes Mellitus, a problem characterized by a deficiency of insulin activity. Other endocrine disorders, such as Cushing's Syndrome, and hypothyroidism may contribute to obesity.
- *Musculoskeletal:* Obesity increases the stress on joints and may lead to or aggravate musculoskeletal problems such as arthritis in dogs and cats. This in turn will make your pet even less active, reducing the use of calories and increasing obesity.
- *Other risks:* Severely obese dogs and cats are also more prone to heat stress, gastrointestinal disorders, liver disease, skin conditions, infectious disease and reproductive problems. In addition, obese animals are at greater risk during surgical procedures and anesthesia than are normal weight dogs and cats.

Management of obesity: Your veterinarian can make a feeding recommendation based on your pet's current body weight. A successful weight loss program may combine moderate exercise with a reduction in caloric intake (dietary energy)

- *Increased activity:* If your dog or cat has no limiting physical problems, a gradual increase in exercise is recommended. Daily walks are an excellent way to increase your pet's activity level and burn calories. Encouraging your cat or dog to play can increase its exercise. In addition, your pet will love this extra attention.
- *Diet:* Moderate caloric restriction is also important. This can be accomplished by either reducing the quantity of your pet's regular food or by feeding the same quantity of a low fat, high fiber reduced calorie type diet. Severely restricting your pet's regular food is not recommended because it may result in your dog or cat receiving an inadequate supply of nutrients. A low fat, high fiber diet is generally preferred because it provides fewer calories and is filling and satisfying to your pet. The following compares and contrasts the fat, fiber, & calories found in one brand of the regular diet vs a prescription diet for weight loss:

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| <u>Fat (%)</u> | - Canine- Regular diet = 14.2, Prescription diet = 5.6 |
| | - Feline- Regular diet = 21.3, Prescription diet = 7.08 |
| <u>Crude Fiber (%)</u> | - Canine- Regular diet = 1.5, Prescription diet = 14.1 |
| | - Feline- Regular diet = 0.9, Prescription diet = 10.1 |
| <u>Calories (Kcal/lb)</u> | - Canine- Regular diet = 1765, Prescription diet = 1176 |
| | - Feline- Regular diet = 2000, Prescription diet = 1272 |
- *Other suggestions which may help your pet to lose weight:* Feeding small frequent meals, measuring the amount of food offered, eliminating all table scraps, eliminating treats from the diet or changing to low fat/reduced calorie treats, and feeding your pet by itself to eliminate competition for food with other animals can all help your pet lose weight.

**** WARNING! *** Severely obese cats must be managed very carefully during weight loss because of the danger of fat accumulation in the liver. It is important that cats eat the amount recommended by the veterinarian and that they never be allowed to go without food for longer than 2 days. *

As with any dietary change, the new reducing diet should be introduced gradually over several days. Patience is the key to a successful weight loss program. It is important that you record your pet's weight weekly and carefully follow your veterinarian's recommendations.

Your reward will be a healthier pet.