



## Overweight Pets

The statistics aren't good. Our pets are packing on the pounds more than ever. The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention conduct a survey annually to find out how our pets are doing.



These are the sobering statistics from 2016: 58.9% of cats and 53.9% of dogs are overweight or obese. That equals almost 42 million dogs and over 50 million cats. In 2012, the figures were 58.3% for cats and 52.5% for dogs so the situation is not getting better.

To add to the problem, 81% of the owners said their pets were at a normal weight when clearly some of them were not. This compounds the problem because the first step is recognizing your pet needs help.

Let's put this extra weight into perspective. Imagine your 10 pound Chihuahua is actually tipping the scales at 20 pounds. If you are supposed to weigh 150 pounds, your body now has to manage 300 pounds. Imagine how difficult it would be to move around and do normal things. You would be out of breath quickly and have aches and pains everywhere.

### **Contributing Factors**

Certain breeds are more likely to gain weight just as some people seem to gain by just looking at food. However, treats are often one of the culprits that we don't consider. Those calories can add up quickly, especially in smaller pets. Also, consider edible dental chews when you start counting calories. Spaying and neutering our pets is a great idea, however it slows down their metabolism. This makes them more prone to putting on extra weight.

As pets get older, they tend to gain weight as well. Too many of our pets are couch potatoes. Their idea of exercise is to stretch and reposition themselves.

Some pets become overweight because owners are following the instructions on the bag of pet food. Often the recommendations are too high. It is just a guideline. Studies have also shown that homemade and raw diets are often too high in calories.

Humans often equate food with love so it's easy to overdo the treats. They enjoy it so much! It's hard to resist and our pets often train us very well. Many people always give their dog a "cookie" when they come indoors. This started as a potty training aid and they just kept doing it because the dog expected it.



### **Health Risks**

We all know that extra weight is not good for us. The same is true for our pets. Several serious diseases are associated with obesity including:

- Diabetes
- Arthritis and ruptured ligaments
- Slipped disks in the back
- Cancer
- Heart & respiratory problems
- Skin problems
- Kidney & urinary tract problems
- Dental disease
- Cushing's disease
- Liver disease (especially cats)

This is some serious stuff. This list alone should give you some very good reasons for helping your pet lose weight.

In addition to diseases, your pet is also at a greater risk with anesthesia and surgery. It is more difficult to draw blood samples and to examine your pet. On top of this, overweight pets don't live as long. Overweight pets have a reduced life expectancy as well as a reduced quality of life.

## Body Condition Score

Preventing your pet from getting overweight in the first place is much easier than getting your pet to lose weight. However, you are probably not reading this if your pet is normal.

The first thing you need to do is decide where your pet is now. The body condition score is an objective method to help you. It is based on either a 5-point or a 9-point scale. The 9-point one lets you fine-tune it a little better.



Things to look and feel for include:

- You should be able to see a waist when you look down on your pet from above. There should be an indentation in front of the hips. If your pet has a very heavy coat, feel the area or wet the fur. If you see “love handles” by the hips, there is no waist!
- Your pet should have a tucked up belly when you look at the side. If it looks like your pet is a straight line or even sags, that's usually excess fat. Cats may not have a pronounced tuck. They have a fat pad in the abdominal area between the hind legs. This should be minimal if your cat is a normal weight.
- You should be able to feel the ribs well enough to count them. There shouldn't be more than slight fat over them.

Look at the body condition score charts we have on our website to see what your pet is. Normal is 5 on the 9-point scale.

## What to Do

So now, you know your pet needs to lose weight. It's time to come up with a plan to reduce calories and increase exercise. Over time, you'll need to recheck the body condition score and adjust your plan.

Before starting a weight loss plan, it's helpful to write down everything your pet eats during a 3-day period. This allows you to see how many treats or other things your pet eats in addition to his food. Measure his food so you know how much he's been getting.

Emotionally prepare yourself for your pet to be begging and remember tough love. Your new mantra is “You love your pet enough to help him lose weight so he can be healthier and live longer.” Repeat this to yourself as often as necessary.

### **Cut back on calories**

You can decrease the amount of his normal diet to start with. One drawback of this method is that your pet may still be hungry since he was used to the other amount.

If you cut back too much, your pet may not be getting all the nutrition he needs either. Companies are assuming your pet is eating a normal amount when they decide how much vitamins, etc. to put into their food. If your pet is eating a lot less, he won't be getting everything he needs. Using a diet made for weight loss is a good choice to avoid this problem. I would start with a prescription diet from us for your best chance at success.

Eliminating high calorie treats will help too. You may not need to cut back on his food as much. Switch to low calorie treats given in small amounts or, better yet, give vegetables (not corn or peas). Cut back on the number of edible chews and give your dog chew toys.

### **Increase exercise**

The next step is to get your pet moving. This can be difficult because your pet needs to spend time exercising. That, in turn, usually means you have to be playing with him or exercising with him.

Tips for dogs:

- Walk more - consider a dog walker during the day
- Throw a ball or Frisbee to get him running
- Hide food in a ball or toy that he has to move around to get the food out
- Swimming is a great option if that's possible

Tips for cats:

- Use a laser pointer or wand type toy for play
- Put food in high places to make your cat jump or climb
- Provide some climbing areas and incentives to use them
- Hide food in a ball or toy that he has to move around to get the food out

If your pet needs to lose a lot of weight or has arthritis, start exercise slowly. You may need to have him lose some weight first. Another option is a veterinary rehab facility that offers weight loss programs.

### **Summary**

Excess weight can have a serious effect on your pet's health so the work you do to help your pet lose weight is worth it. Before starting, have your pet examined to be sure there are no health problems contributing to the problem. Always keep in mind your end goal – a healthy pet that will live longer. You can do it!

