

Obesity

Obesity is an extremely common problem and, as in the human, can be detrimental to the health of the dog or cat. The overweight pet has many added stresses upon its body and is at an increased risk of diabetes, liver problems, joint pain and other diseases.

Obesity develops when energy intake exceeds the energy requirements. The excess energy is then stored as fat. Once the pet is obese, it may remain obese even though excessive caloric intake may not continue. The majority of cases of obesity are related to simple over-feeding often coupled with lack of exercise.

Less data exists concerning obesity in cats, however the condition appears to be less common. It has been suggested that cats have a much better ability to regulate their own energy intake. An additional factor to be considered when managing obesity in cats is hunting; it may be necessary to confine the cat to the house or to hospitalize it to prevent "additions" to the diet.

For both dogs and cats, as a subjective assessment of body condition, you should be able to feel the backbone and palpate the ribs in a healthy-weight animal. If the ribs cannot be felt or cannot be felt without pressing, there is too much fat. Also, looking down on the animal from above, there should be a noticeable "waist" between the back of the rib cage and the hips. Viewed from the side, there should be a "tuck" in their tummy; the abdomen should go up from the bottom of the rib cage to inside the thighs. Cats or dogs that fail this simple evaluation may be overweight.

Diet: The need for calories drives the urge to eat in dogs and cats. Overweight animals consume more calories than they require. The patient's daily caloric requirement must be determined, a suitable food selected (one which will provide optimal nutrition along with caloric restriction) and the proper amount calculated to effect weight loss. The diet should contain a normal level of a moderately fermentable fiber and a fat system that prevents the skin and coat from deteriorating during the weight loss. Diets that dilute calories with high fiber lead to increased stool volumes, frequent urges to defecate and variable decreases in nutrient digestibilities.

Exercise: Increasing physical activity can be a valuable contributor to both weight loss and ideal weight maintenance. Regular exercise burns more calories, reduces appetite, changes body composition and increases resting metabolic rate. In addition to restricting the dog's caloric intake through proper diet, it is extremely important to develop a suitable exercise program.

Owner Behavior: A successful weight management program requires a permanent change in the behaviors that have allowed the pet to become overweight. Some tips for a successful weight loss program include:

- Owner commitment to the pet's weight loss.
- Separate the pet when the family eats.
- Feed the pet several small meals throughout the day.
- Feed all meals and treats only in the pet's bowl.
- Reduce snacks or treats.
- Provide non-food related attention.