

## Obesity

Unfortunately, obesity is the most common 'condition' seen in veterinary medicine, that results in adverse health effects. Even a moderate excess of body fat can increase the risk of disease and reduce lifespan. As with the human situation, our pets are also getting fatter. More than 50% of companion animals are overweight or obese. Some of the most common breeds of dogs to be overweight or obese include Labradors, Golden Retrievers, Rottweilers, Beagles, Cocker Spaniels, Border Collies and Pugs. Middle-aged dogs (5-10 years of age) are most commonly overweight.

The definition of obesity is accumulation of adipose (fatty) tissue due to an imbalance between energy intake and energy expenditure. Obesity is almost always caused by lifestyle-related factors such as limited activity and an abundance of food. Desexing also increases the risk of obesity, but our pets still have to be over-fed and under-exercised for this to occur. There are a few disease states that increase the risk of obesity, but these contribute in only a very small percentage of cases (less than 1%). These diseases include hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid gland), hyperadrenocorticism (also known as Cushing's Disease – where higher than normal levels of steroids are produced by the adrenal glands) or an insulinoma (an insulin-secreting tumour, located in the pancreas).

The most common condition caused by or made worse by obesity is osteoarthritis. It is not unusual for overweight, large breed dogs (eg Labradors or Golden Retrievers) to show symptoms of osteoarthritis from 4-5 years of age. Carrying increased weight over a lifetime certainly increases wear and tear on joints and causes an earlier onset and a worsening of symptoms of arthritis. Obesity certainly causes a hugely increased risk of diabetes in cats. In dogs it may increase the risk, but in practice the majority of newly diagnosed dogs with diabetes are either overweight or obese. Obesity will also worsen the symptoms of other conditions including heart disease and respiratory diseases.

Unfortunately, pet owners can only blame themselves for their pets being overweight. Wild animals are never overweight or obese. Overweight pets are being given access or opportunities to eat too much food. Feeding treats is a large part of the problem. Most pets these days are fed too many treats that are high in calories and fat. Some dogs and cats are being given free access to dry food – some will control their intake but many consume too much. In the wild, pets don't have access to bowls of dry food, they must work for any food they consume. A lot of pets these days just don't get enough exercise either. This being said, overfeeding contributes to at least 80% of the obesity epidemic, under-exercising contributes 20% or less to the problem.

Weight loss is achievable in every pet. However owners must strictly adhere to guidelines to ensure that their pet doesn't consume too many calories. Overweight pets should be fed accurately measured quantities of a low calorie and low fat food. Most brands of commercial food will have a 'weight control' variety. Foods for 'senior' pets usually have

reduced calories. Overweight pets should be fed minimal or no treats. Treats should contribute to less than 10% of the pet's caloric intake. Treats should be chosen wisely – carrot sticks, pieces of the pet's regular dry food or appropriately formulated treats should be chosen. Human foods, especially off cuts of meat and sweet biscuits and cakes should be avoided (one sweet biscuit to a dog is the equivalent of a human eating a Big Mac). If the pet is fed a bone, their daily meal(s) should be reduced by at least 50%, as they consume many calories eating the bone. Owners should aim to reduce their pet's weight by 1-2% a week. Owners should aim to exercise their pets for at least 30 minutes daily.

If you suspect your pet is overweight, I would recommend consulting your veterinarian to formulate a plan to reduce their weight. The first step is recognising that your pet has a problem. Veterinarians sometimes find it difficult to approach the topic (it is quite easy to offend owners by announcing that their pet is overweight). With such a high percentage of pets being overweight these days, we find that owners have become conditioned to thinking that overweight is 'normal'. It is not unusual to hear owners of pets in nice, lean condition complaining about people in the street questioning them as to why their pet is so 'skinny'. It should be possible to feel the ribs of all companion animals (they should feel like the back of a human hand). It is normal for ribs to be visible, but they should not be too prominent. All pets should have a 'waist' (ie their body should curve inwards) just behind their ribcage. The following link provides a helpful tool for assessing your dog's body condition. If you are concerned, please consult your veterinarian.

<http://www.purina.co.uk/content/docs/downloadable-pdfs/bodycondsytempdf.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

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