

Pet Obesity – Prevention is Better than Cure

Weight Management – Feeding for Health

Our pets are our best friends, our confidantes, our companions and, on occasion, our lifelines. Over December and in to the New Year we have seen a number of shocking stories in the media about pet obesity and the serious impact it is having on the health of our pets.

Obesity is equally as serious for pets as it is for humans and the links between human obesity and pet obesity are gradually becoming better understood; however, the fundamental difference with pets is that obesity is more easily preventable for them. The solution is simpler and more direct than solving the problem with humans.

The pet population in the UK currently stands at around 57 million, homed in 11 million UK households (40%). A number of recent reports have highlighted the current state of the pet nation and depending on which statistics you read, somewhere between 30 and 60% of pets are significantly overweight or obese.

It is Extremely Rare for Medical Problems to be the Cause of Obesity in Dogs, Cats or Rabbits

There really are very few animals – like humans – who can get away with the excuse that they're "big boned". For pets, as for humans, obesity occurs when energy intake exceeds energy output. However, while the cause and effect is simple, the issue is not. A pet's natural instincts are towards food intake, wherever and whenever possible, so it is the exclusive responsibility of pet owners to manage their pets' diet and regulate their calorific intake. In most cases, obesity results from overfeeding and too many human food snacks and treats given, coupled with insufficient exercise.

Health Impact of Pet Obesity

Recent studies have also highlighted that owners are becoming increasingly aware of the significant health impact of being overweight.

As pets become overweight, their metabolism slows down, causing feeding and exercising requirements to change. Aside from causing general discomfort and lethargy, excessive weight can also lead to a number of problems, each of which diminishes pets' quality of life:

- breathing difficulties with exercise
- heat intolerance
- fatigue
- gastrointestinal problems
- lowered resistance to infectious diseases, particularly viral infections
- skin conditions due to the inability to groom
- straining of joints
- spinal problems
- dental problems

- irritability, due to increased discomfort
- diabetes

Fundamentally, obesity detracts from a pet's ability to play and enjoy a healthy and happy life, indoors and out.

One longitudinal study found that by keeping dogs at their ideal body condition (weight), an extra two years could be added to their lives. There could be no better incentive for owners to keep their pets at a healthy weight.

The Latest Findings

Each year the veterinary charity, the PDSA, releases a report focusing on key welfare issues for cats, dogs and rabbits; the findings reflect the challenge in hand:

- Almost half (48%) of pet owners do not know their pet's weight
- Over 4 million pets are fed scraps and leftovers as part of their main meal
- Only 18% of owners know their pet's body condition score – a measurement system routinely used by vets to see whether pets are a healthy size
- Despite this, 79% state that their pet is at their ideal weight

Over 96% of veterinary professionals believe the focus should be on preventing obesity rather than curing it.

Causal Factors

1. Misconception on Body Size

Why has the crisis escalated? One of the reasons we have reached this point is that we are no

longer able to recognise a healthy, ideal body shape. Our perceptions have become blurred, particularly when identifying overweight body shapes. When asked, pet owners' perceptions of what constitutes normal weight was found to be massively blurred, with over half of cat and dog owners unable to accurately identify a 'normal' dog or cat body shape.

According to Dr Philippa Yam MRCVS, Senior Lecturer in Gastroenterology, School of Veterinary Medicine, Glasgow University: 'Many pet owners may believe that their pet is healthy and it could come as a shock when a professional breaks the news that their pet is in fact overweight. Misperception of pet body condition most certainly is a factor in pet obesity and one which needs to be recognised so that positive steps can be taken to ensure the number of overweight pets in the UK is reduced.'

According to the PDSA Paw Report 2016, 84% of veterinary professionals are of the view that the majority of

pet owners have no understanding of what a healthy body shape looks like for their pet.

Misconception presents a fundamental barrier in managing weight, not only in humans but also in pets. To help address this, PFMA has developed a series of pet owner-friendly body condition score charts and owners are encouraged to use these as part of their ongoing at-home care routine. The aim is to help owners have a better understanding of what is a healthy size and to keep an eye on this on a regular basis. The charts are available for cats, dogs, rabbits, birds and guinea pigs, and can be downloaded at www.pfma.org.uk/pet-size-o-meter

2. Treating the Real Issue

According to a recent survey, almost half of pets are fed too many treats and the same proportion are regularly fed food intended for humans. Over 5.7 million pets are given treats as part of their daily diet, including crisps, cake, leftovers of human food, cheese, chips and takeaways. This is a marginal change from 5.5 million last year.

Treating pets with specially formulated pet treats is fine, provided this is done as a part of nutritionally balanced diet, and is in proportion and accounted for when giving main meals. Healthy treats should only be given occasionally to avoid excess calories. When treats are given regularly for training reasons, they should form no more than 10% of the total energy intake (meaning 90% energy from complete food and up to 10% from treats).

3. The Emotional Bond

Emotional interaction between people and their pets is vital to the relationship-building process. Key to this process is owners putting effort into making time spent with pets as productive as possible, in order to create a healthy and enjoyable bond. Emotional interaction can occur at various times, such as at exercise, play and feeding time.

However, as a result of busy and hectic lives, owners are feeling increasingly guilty for not spending enough time with their pets and often, not giving their pet enough exercise. Compensating for this with food treats has become normal practice.

This is an emotive subject and one which is closely linked with the owner's relationship with food. Many owners fail to seek advice on their pet's weight because their attitude towards treating their pet is mirrored in their own eating habits.

4. Walk the Walk

As mentioned above, diet is not the only factor in determining pets' weight. In fact, owners who acknowledge that their pets are overweight blame lack of exercise and overindulgence on treats, as opposed to fundamental problems with their pets' diets. Ensuring that pets are taking the right amount of exercise for their breed, size and age is crucial. Exercise not only sustains physical health, it also aids emotional wellbeing, and fit and healthy pets are more likely to be relaxed and contented pets.



According to John Foster MRCVS, Chairman of the Pet Health Council, one of the benefits of pet ownership is increased fitness levels for both pet and human alike: "Pet ownership can have a really positive impact on family fitness. Dog walking or playing with a cat is a great way for people and their pets to burn a few more calories. This is particularly important when lifestyles are becoming increasingly sedentary and obesity is a growing issue for all concerned."

The Importance of Feeding the Right Diet

Feeding commercially prepared foods takes the guesswork out of feeding pets. It is the equivalent of having a personal dietician preparing every meal. There are two types of pet food: complete and complementary.

Complete pet food must legally contain all the nutrients a pet needs to support its daily life. By following the feeding guidelines, owners can have complete confidence that their pet is receiving just the right amount of nutritional goodness. However, it is important to emphasise that feeding guidelines are just that, and there is no such thing as an average dog or cat. The amount an owner needs to feed will depend on a number of factors, including size, age, level of activity, etc. The advice is to start with the feeding guidelines and then adjust the amounts accordingly. It is also useful to weigh out portions at the start of the day and then apportion as per the pets' regular feeding routine.

Complementary pet food means that owners must add other food to their pets' diet to ensure that they receive the right combination of nutrients in a day, for example a mixer biscuit. Similarly to complete pet food, owners can easily follow the feeding guidelines on the packet.

Pet treats can be incorporated into both a complete and complementary pet food diet. The important thing for owners to remember is that they must ensure that the volume of treats is balanced against volumes of pet food at mealtimes (and comprises no more than 10% of the daily energy intake).

Top Five Tips on Managing a Pet's Weight:

1. Read the feeding guidelines and adjust the amount fed according to the pet's individual needs
2. Treat responsibly – treats should comprise no more than 10% of the daily energy intake and any treats given must be taken in to consideration at mealtimes
3. Don't overfeed – be aware as a family who is feeding what – keep a rota
4. Use the PFMA pet size-o-meters to monitor the pet's body shape
5. Keep fit – ensure sufficient exercise for the pet

For more information on healthy feeding and a series of weight management tools, please visit www.pfma.org.uk



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