

# Obesity

## ABOUT THE DIAGNOSIS

**Cause:** Obesity is a condition of elevated body weight due to unnecessary, excess body fat. It is caused by a consistent intake of energy (calories) that exceeds the expenditure of energy. There are many reasons why energy intake may exceed expenditure in dogs and cats. Some pets have a sedentary lifestyle. Neutered dogs and cats are more likely to be overweight (mild to moderate excess of fat) to obese (severe excess of fat), and it is thought that hormonal changes that occur as a result of neutering play a role in the development of obesity. Age may play a role, because in animals, as in people, energy requirements change as dogs and cats go through life stages (pediatric, adult, and geriatric). Perhaps the most common and most important cause is inappropriate nutrition: the amount that dogs and cats are fed today is often much, much more than what their bodies are adapted to needing. Fortunately, this cause of obesity is the most easily treated as long as a pet's caretakers and family care enough for the pet to step back, assess (with the veterinarian's help) how much really should be fed, and stay with a feeding plan.

Some breeds of dogs may have a genetic predisposition to obesity, including the cocker spaniel, basset hound, golden retriever, beagle, and dachshund. These breeds require fewer calories to maintain a healthy weight, and therefore they may easily become obese if fed amounts that are otherwise normal for other breeds of dogs. This fact helps explain why two animals that otherwise seem exactly alike may eat the same amount of food, and one gains weight while the other does not. If you see that your pet seems to be eating very little, and yet your veterinarian tells you that your pet needs to lose weight, your pet may simply have a more efficient metabolism, and needs to eat less than most other pets in order to not gain weight.

Certain feeding practices play a major role in the development of obesity. Feeding treats often, particularly high fat foods or table scraps, contributes directly to obesity. Some pet owners or family members use treats to bribe their pets to perform certain behaviors (coming inside/going outside, performing tricks). These treats can add up to many calories in a 24-hour period. In households with multiple dogs or cats, one pet may occasionally consume the meal of its housemate without the pet owner's knowledge. Knowing that any of these situations is happening is something you should mention to your veterinarian. It is very common for other family members to be the "guilty parties" who feed extra treats, or for a dominant pet to eat the meals of a submissive pet.

There are several medical conditions that can cause obesity; they include hypothyroidism, hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's disease), and other glandular problems. In general, these are very uncommon reasons for obesity, and by far the most common reason is a mismatch between what a dog or cat is being fed and what is actually needed by the metabolism.

**Diagnosis:** Obesity in pets is extremely widespread; approximately 25%–40% of dogs and cats seen in veterinary clinics in North America are overweight or obese. There are numerous methods of diagnosing this condition. The method used depends largely on your veterinarian's preference and experience.

Because obesity can be associated with other diseases (either as a cause or as an effect), your veterinarian may need to perform several tests including a complete blood count (CBC), blood biochemistry profile, urinalysis, fecal analysis, and measurement of

thyroid hormone levels. These tests provide information about the general health of your dog or cat and are meant to identify medical reasons to explain obesity. Some abnormalities may be indicative of serious health problems and may need to be explored further.

## LIVING WITH THE DIAGNOSIS

It is important to know that obesity can make many preexisting medical conditions worse. In pets, it is linked to arthritis, diabetes mellitus, urinary bladder problems (feline lower urinary tract signs/idiopathic cystitis), dermatologic (skin) problems, heart and circulatory system problems, respiratory problems, and others. Pregnant dogs and cats that are obese have a greater chance of delivery problems (dystocia), presenting a risk to both the mother and the young. The overall quality of life for obese dogs and cats often is greatly decreased, and the average life span of these animals is approximately 1 to 2 years shorter than pets of normal weight.

Fortunately, these and other disorders may decrease in severity with weight loss and appropriate treatment. Knowing this is the human's advantage: dogs and cats have evolved to consume everything they can in the wild, but in a modern environment this is unnecessary. Still, their instinct drives them to consume more than their bodies need. Therefore, the true sign of caring for a pet is to feed meals and treats appropriately and avoid "killing them with kindness."

Obesity is preventable. Discuss weight management with your veterinarian when you bring any new pet home for the first time because avoiding obesity is an essential part of any dog or cat's health.

## TREATMENT

If obesity is a problem for your dog or cat, then your veterinarian should take a complete dietary history. You can expect to be asked the name and amount of food that you feed your pet, the type (dry or canned), how often you feed your pet, how often and what type of snacks (including home-cooked food) you offer, how much of what your pet eats in a day comes from other people and other sources, and so on. It is important that these questions are answered honestly. The point of understanding this information is not to scold or pass judgment, but to sincerely help a companion's health by preventing problems that obesity causes.

Your veterinarian can calculate an ideal weight for your pet and can develop a weight loss program to help you work toward this goal. This program will gradually alter the current feeding regimen. The type of food, frequency of feeding, time of day for feeding, and other factors may change. A sensible exercise routine is also an important part of this program to a degree that fits with your schedule and your pet's temperament. Your understanding and your role in carrying out this plan are required for its success.

Simply decreasing the amount of food currently offered is usually not sufficient to achieve weight loss. In fact, limiting your pet's food by too much can cause food-seeking behaviors that can be unpleasant (digging through garbage, pestering you, etc.), or at an extreme, could cause nutritional deficiencies. Instead, there are many diets available that are formulated for safe weight loss, and these leave pets feeling full while containing less energy and therefore promoting weight loss. Your veterinarian can recommend one that is appropriate.

If a family member or other caretaker is feeding too many treats and does not have the willpower to stop, some useful approaches to control this source of weight gain can include:

- You control the core diet (pet food), so be sure it contains bulk, such as high fiber content, and as little energy/calories as needed.
- Explain to the person overfeeding treats or other foods that the pet's obesity can lead to life-threatening health problems (like in people), and tell him/her the percentage of excess body weight that your pet is carrying, as assessed by your veterinarian. Obesity in pets is entirely reversible, so encourage all members of the pet's surroundings not to give in to begging or "a hungry look in the eyes."
- Many pets love treats because they are getting attention, not just because they are swallowing a piece of food. So encourage the person who is overfeeding treats to spend some time petting, playing with, or walking the pet instead of feeding treats.
- Telling family members and caretakers to stop feeding treats altogether may just encourage "secret treats" hidden from your view. You can instead ask the person to use different treats that are not calorie-rich. Examples that work well with some dogs include fresh baby carrots, canned green beans, and pieces of plain, dried rice cake. For cats, very small (confetti-size) pieces of dried cooked meat or fish can be especially flavorful.
- Ask your veterinarian about low-energy/low-calorie treats that you can purchase or prepare yourself as an alternative to commercially-bought processed treats.

### DOs

- Inform your veterinarian if your cat or dog has ever been diagnosed with a medical condition and is taking medication, since this may influence obesity.
- Realize that weight loss in a pet helps them in a way that you know now but that they will not know until it is too late.
- Transition to the weight loss diet over a period of 5 to 7 days, mixing it in with the previous diet in small proportions (25% weight loss food, 75% previous diet) at first for 2-3 days, then 50-50, and so on. This helps prevent aversion to the new food simply due to habit or longstanding preference.

### DON'Ts

- Do not substitute another diet without consulting your veterinarian.
- Do not make any dog or cat exercise in a hot, humid environment, or more than they show you they can tolerate. Overweight pets have a lower tolerance to these conditions and serious health problems such as heatstroke, exhaustion, or heart problems may result.
- Do not be discouraged or frustrated with the time it takes to reduce a pet's body weight. Good nutrition requires gradual,

not rapid, weight reduction, which often is not visible to the naked eye. Regular weighing (e.g., weekly or every 2 weeks) can help in this regard. A reasonable time frame for returning to a normal weight for almost any dog or cat is 3-4 months.

### WHEN TO CALL YOUR VETERINARIAN

- If your dog or your cat will not eat at all. Cats can develop a serious, life-threatening condition called hepatic lipidosis if they do not eat for 24 hours or more. In this "Catch-22" situation, weight loss can be pursued while avoiding a complete loss of appetite by gradually transitioning from the usual, energy-dense diet to the new, low-energy diet over 1 to 2 weeks, a little bit at a time.
- If you cannot keep a scheduled appointment.

### SIGNS TO WATCH FOR

- General signs of illness: lethargy, weakness, or decreased appetite. None of these is expected with weight loss, so the occurrence of these symptoms warrants a recheck for obesity-related illness or unrelated health problems.

### ROUTINE FOLLOW-UP

- Several follow-up appointments are required to assess body condition and to alter the diet and exercise regimen accordingly. It is reasonable to plan on monthly or even semimonthly visits to the veterinarian for the first 3 to 4 months of a weight loss program in order to monitor progress.

*Other information that may be useful: "How-To" Client Education Sheet:*

- How to Effectively Induce Weight Loss in a Dog or Cat



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