

Obesity in Your Pet

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

Is your pooch pudgy? Is your feline fat? When you try to feel ribs, do you feel folds of fat instead? As a veterinarian, I see obese pets every day, day after day! Obesity is as much a problem in pets as it is in humans, and it can cause many of the same health problems.

There are many reasons why our pets become overweight, but the most common cause is overeating – that is, the pet consumes more calories than he uses. Other contributing factors to obesity in pets are heredity, breed, body type, and certain medical conditions. Spaying and neutering are often blamed for causing pets to become overweight. This perception seems to be derived from the fact that altered pets do tend to be more calm and relaxed, and to be more content to stay close to home (which are good things). But, a calmer animal doesn't cause weight gain – overeating does.



Do you know the ideal weight for your pet? Your veterinarian can help you with this. The ideal weight of dogs varies tremendously – from Chihuahuas, who weigh about 6 pounds, to St. Bernards, who can weigh as much as 165 pounds. And what about mixed breeds? There will be many variations, based on such factors as bone structure, body type, sex, etc. Most cats should weigh between 8 and 10 pounds.

If you're not sure if your pet is overweight, try feeling her rib cage. Put your hands on the rib cage with your thumbs over her spine. If you can easily feel the ribs, then your pet is probably a normal weight. If you can see the ribs, then your pet is too thin. If you can feel fat between the skin and ribs, or if the ribs are difficult to feel, your pet is overweight. If you cannot feel the ribs at all, your pet is obese. In cats, a large abdomen that hangs down and swings when the cat walks indicates obesity.

There are many health risks associated with obesity. Overweight dogs and cats have a higher incidence of heart and lung problems, diabetes and arthritis. They're at an increased risk for complications should they need to be anesthetized for surgery. Overweight pets can have problems with their skin as well.

The treatment for weight loss is (you've heard it before) reduced caloric intake and increased energy output. Less food, more exercise. A reduced caloric intake can best be accomplished by feeding your pet a high-fiber, low-fat diet, which allows your pet to continue to eat approximately the same volume of food as before and still feel full and satisfied. Feeding lesser amounts of a regular diet can lead to vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and your pet's hunger won't be satisfied. You should cut down on treats or eliminate them altogether. To reduce begging and sneaking of snacks, keep your pet out of the room when the family is eating. And make sure your pet doesn't have access to the garbage can or the neighbor's dog or cat food!

Your veterinarian should be the final judge of your pet's weight status. Make an appointment with him or her to determine if your pet is truly just overweight and not suffering from signs of heart, kidney or glandular disorders. At your visit, after a complete physical exam and blood work, your pet's dietary needs can be established. Remember, you can give your pet a longer and happier life by providing the proper diet, exercise, and regular veterinary care.

Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.