

Keeping Your Pet at a Healthy Weight

- Nearly 50% of adult dogs and cats in the United States are overweight or obese.
- Obesity increases the risk for other serious health problems.
- Follow your veterinarian's advice on which diet to feed your pet, how much, and how often.
- Give your pet plenty of opportunities for regular exercise that is appropriate for his or her age and health status.

Why to Watch Your Pet's Weight

Pet obesity has become a very common problem. Studies indicate that nearly 50% of adult dogs and cats in the United States are overweight or obese, and that percentage increases among older pets. Obesity increases the risk for other serious health problems, including osteoarthritis, diabetes (in cats), heart and respiratory diseases, and many types of cancers. Overweight pets are also at increased risk for complications during anesthesia if they need to undergo surgery or other procedures. And if a pet already has a health condition, obesity makes the problem that much harder to manage. Being overweight can also lower your pet's energy level and hamper his or her ability to enjoy an active lifestyle with you and your family.

What Causes Weight Gain?

Simply put, weight gain results when an animal eats more calories than it burns off during normal activities or exercise. Factors that can contribute to weight gain include:

- Overfeeding or overeating
- Inactivity or low activity levels
- Breed
- Age
- Reproductive status (intact versus spayed/neutered)
- Preexisting diseases (e.g., hypothyroidism, diabetes mellitus, Cushing disease)

Certain breeds, especially smaller ones, are more prone to being overweight or obese, as are many senior pets.

How to Assess Your Pet's Weight

Whether your pet is a dog or a cat, and regardless of what size or breed it is, you should be able to feel—but not see—its ribs. Being able to feel some ribs is a sign that your pet is at a healthy weight. Additionally, if your pet is at a healthy weight, it should have a distinct “waist” where the body narrows, just behind the rib cage and in front of the hind-quarters, when viewed from above. When viewed from the side, your pet's abdomen should appear to be slightly tucked up behind the rib cage. If your pet has fat deposits over its back and at the base of its tail, or if it lacks a waist or an abdominal tuck, chances are that it has a weight problem.

Veterinarians typically use a measurement called a *body condition scale* or *body condition score* to assess whether a pet is underweight, overweight, or just

Reading Labels

Under federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations, every pet food must include a label listing its ingredients and a guaranteed analysis of how much protein, fat, and other important nutrients are in it. Reading the percentages can get complicated, so one of the best quick ways to assess the quality of a diet is to look at the ingredient list. By law, the pet food manufacturer must list the ingredients by weight. For more information on reading pet food labels, visit www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/ResourcesforYou and click on “Pet Food Labels—General” under “Information for Consumers Fliers.”

right. Your veterinarian can use this scale to show you what to look for when checking your pet's weight.

Know What You Feed

Excess weight is generally due to a very simple problem—too much food! Treats and other tidbits are also major culprits. Although commercially produced pet foods must meet AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) nutritional standards, which ensure that they contain protein, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, and water in the proper proportions, treats are often not nutritionally complete and balanced and can contain a lot of calories. Therefore, it is important to be aware of how much your pet is eating each day. This information can help your veterinarian if he or she determines that your pet needs to lose weight.

To track how much your pet eats, it may be helpful for your family to keep a “food diary.” Everyone in the family should write down how much he or she feeds the pet every time the pet is fed. Treats count; so do rewards given during training sessions or when encouraging a pet to take medication.

It is also important to feed your pet the right food for his or her species, age, and size. For example, an adult dog or cat should not be fed a formula for puppy or kitten growth. Ask a veterinary professional for advice on what products offer the right nutritional mix for your pet, and how much and how often to feed. Most diets come with feeding guidelines, but every pet is different. Your veterinarian can make recommendations specifically for your pet.

Feeding “people” food to pets can not only contribute to weight gain but also cause other medical problems. Some foods that are perfectly healthy for

people, like grapes, can be toxic to pets. Even foods that aren't toxic can contribute to stomach problems, food allergies, or other problems for pets. Additionally, feeding table food to a pet that is already receiving a nutritionally balanced pet food changes the “balance” of that pet's diet. Consult your veterinarian before feeding any human food to your pet.

A Note on Exercise

It is also essential to give your pet plenty of opportunities for regular exercise that is appropriate for his or her age and health status. A vigorous daily walk—if approved by your veterinarian—is an excellent place to start for many dogs. Most cats won't tolerate leash walking, but regular play periods with fun toys, such as a light pointer or tossed ball, can provide satisfactory activity levels and help maintain their health.

Avoiding the Battle of the Bulge

- Feed a well-balanced, veterinarian-approved diet. If necessary, feed a calorie-restricted diet.
- When you treat your pet, give healthy treats.
- Consult your veterinarian before giving your pet any human food.
- Make sure your pet gets plenty of regular age- and health-appropriate exercise.
- Don't allow your pet to have unrestricted access to food—its own or another pet's!
- Make sure all family members are on the same page when it comes to feeding—and treating—your pet.