

Pet Obesity

By Dr. Lora Newman

Did you know that 25% of the dogs and cats in the United States are considered obese? Obesity is the most common nutritional disease of dogs and cats. It is associated with numerous health problems. It is important to monitor your pet's weight closely and prevent your beloved friend from packing on the unwanted pounds.

How do I know if my pet is overweight?

The easiest way to evaluate your pet's weight is by feeling their ribs. We utilize a body condition score, which is a number that takes into account the amount of fat that is overlying the ribs, the back and the abdomen. If you can easily feel your pet's ribs, it would be considered thin to normal. If the ribs are difficult to feel, that would be overweight. If the ribs cannot be felt, your pet is probably obese.

Cats are difficult to evaluate and often appear thin, but have a significant fat pad along the abdomen.

With an accurate weight and a veterinarian's assessment of a body condition score, you will know if any changes need to be made to your pet's current feeding and exercise routine.

Why does it matter if my pet has a few extra pounds?

An overweight pet is at a considerably higher risk for development of several diseases compared to a pet that is at an ideal weight. In addition, the overweight pet has a lack of energy and decreased performance which can reduce a pet's enjoyment for life.

If your pet is overweight, the medical side effects can be detrimental. Obesity can cause, worsen or increase the risk for developing: **Arthritis, Heart Disease, Diabetes, Liver Disease, Back/Spinal Disease, Ligament Ruptures, Skin Disease, Exercise Intolerance, Heat Stress, Susceptibility to Infections, Prolonged Recovery from Surgery, Risk with Anesthesia, Gastrointestinal Upset.**

Maintaining your pet at an ideal weight will lessen the chance for development of these ailments and can reduce future health care costs for your pet. If your pet feels good physically, they will feel good mentally. They will maintain their enjoyment for life giving you quality time with your best friend.

How do I properly manage my pet's weight?

Recognition is the first step. If you feel that your pet is overweight, it is important to have them evaluated by a veterinarian. You may be doing everything appropriately, so it is necessary to discuss your pet's routine in detail. Usually the reason for a pet being overweight is consumption of excessive calories or lack of exercise. It is important to limit your pet's food to a high quality commercial diet formulated for your pet's appropriate life stage. Based on an ideal weight, the daily caloric intake should be calculated. If you are feeding special treats, these calories need to be included in the daily intake. Often we measure the food with a coffee can or we feed "about a cup". It is easy to overfeed based on approximation, that is why it is important to actually measure the amount of food you are giving to your pet.

Exercise is an important part to the weight loss plan. There are tricks available for cats to promote play and exercise. If your pet is not accustomed to long walks, start slow and gradually build up stamina. You will find that your pet's energy level and desire to exercise will increase as the weight decreases. Weight loss does not happen overnight. It is important to work closely with your veterinarian and come up with a plan that works for the entire family. It will take commitment and time to reach your goal. In the end, your pet will be happy, healthy and able to enjoy life to the fullest.