

Is your pet battling the bulge?

Just as obesity has become an epidemic in humans, it is also a major health concern in our companion animals. What is the cause? Perhaps it is the food we feed. Perhaps it is related to the overwhelming number of treats on the market. Perhaps it is because many of our pets have a relatively sedentary lifestyle. Regardless of the cause, the first and most important step is to recognize if it is an issue for your pet.

Although it may be easy to measure, a pet's poundage is not the ideal way to determine if it is overweight. The different breeds have such a wide variety in size and stature, that body condition scoring has become the preferred measurement by many veterinary health professionals. There are many different body condition scoring systems available to reference. The system developed by veterinarians at Purina uses a scale of 1 to 9. A body condition score of 1 is extremely thin and emaciated whereas a body condition score of 9 is grossly obese.

On the 1 to 9 scale, the ideal body condition score is 4 or 5. The ribs are easily felt, the end of the rib cage can be seen, the waistline can be seen from above, and when looking from the side, the abdomen tucks up. Contact your veterinarian for help in determining your pet's body condition score, or consult one of the published charts. Some pets will naturally have a lower than ideal body condition score. As long as this is not due to a recent, unexplained weight loss, and as long as the pet is being fed appropriately, a 2 or 3 body condition score can be normal. However, any pet with a body condition score over 5 is overweight and this needs to be addressed.

It is important to prevent and treat obesity because of the effects obesity can have on the overall health of an animal. Conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, certain types of liver disease, orthopedic diseases and more have been linked to obesity. Overweight pets are also much more prone to injury and arthritis.

To start with, take a mental note of your pet's general body condition, and monitor it on a monthly basis. For pets with a tendency to be a bit heavy, simply limiting their diet is the first step. When a measuring cup is used to measure the amount of food given per day, the amount that was previously being fed can often be quite a surprise! The feeding guides on pet food bags are great guidelines, but the average dog and cat tends to need a bit less than what is recommended (especially if they are getting any "extras"). If your pet is overweight, you may be able to simply cut back on the amount previously being fed, or you may need to switch to a lower calorie diet. It can often help to divide the food into two or three small meals per day rather than one large one.

Treats are a major contributor to obesity. Monitor the type and number of treats given on any given day. I am a firm believer in using treats as rewards and training tools, but realize that when a lot of treats are being given, then the amount of food fed per day should be cut back. Try using lower calorie treats and even break them into smaller pieces. Dental treats are great for the teeth, the only drawback to them is that some are

high in fat, so if these are given, then the amount of food given at meals needs to be decreased.

Exercise also plays a big role in weight issues. Certain times of year may involve more or less activity, so the diet should be adapted appropriately. For instance, a cat that spends a lot of time outdoors exploring, hunting and playing in the summer, but spends its winters curled up on the couch should have its calories restricted during those inactive months.

If your pet has not had a regular exercise schedule, make sure to introduce exercise gradually to minimize the risk of injury, and consider consulting with your veterinarian for additional advice. Regular play helps burn calories (laser pointers and feather toys are great for cats). It also stimulates the mind and can often help curb behavioral problems. Try putting the food dish somewhere where the pet has to climb a flight of stairs to get to (or some other form of work). For cats, try putting the litter box at the other end of the house from where the food is. For dogs, regular walks (even if they are just short ones) will make a big difference.

If you have made dietary and exercise changes and your pet does not seem to be losing weight, or if you are having problems implementing these changes, then it is time for a good consultation with your veterinarian. There are many other suggestions for weight loss programs. A pet may need a prescription weight loss diet. As part of a thorough physical exam and/or blood work, your veterinarian may detect health problems that may be keeping your pet from losing weight.

Putting your pet on a diet and exercise plan does not need to be uncomfortable or unpleasant for either of you. Your veterinarian can also help you set reasonable goals and reasonable timelines for your pet's weight loss program. A small effort can go a long way to helping your pet live a long and healthy life.