

Feeding Your Pet: How Much Is Too Much?



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As every loving pet owner knows, it's hard to resist a furry face begging for a special treat. We look into those big brown eyes, hear that hopeful purr, and feel that the best way to reward all that devotion is by giving our favorite dog or cat something tasty to eat.

In reality, though, this is often the worst way to repay our pet's affection. When treats make up too much of a pet's diet ($\geq 10\%$), the nutritional balance of an otherwise healthy diet can be upset. Too many treats can also lead to obesity, which 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. Despite these concerns, however, pet obesity has become something of an epidemic in the United States.

Studies indicate that nearly 50% of adult dogs and cats in the United States are overweight or obese, and this percentage increases among older pets.^a

Finally, apart from contributing to potentially dangerous health conditions, obesity can affect your pet's overall comfort and quality of life.

^aAssociation for Pet Obesity Prevention. *2008 National Pet Obesity Awareness Day Study*. Accessed September 2009 at petobesityprevention.com.

Being overweight can lower your pet's energy level and hamper his or her ability to enjoy an active lifestyle with you and your family.

What Causes Obesity?

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

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

This is why it is vitally important to follow your veterinarian's advice on what particular diet to

Managing 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.
- ▶ 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.

choose *and* how much and how often to feed your pet. Pay close attention to the labels of the pet foods that you buy. For example, an adult pet shouldn't be fed a diet formulated for puppy or kitten growth periods. If your pet has a weight problem, there are many good-quality adult maintenance and weight control diets to choose from, and your veterinarian can advise you on which best meets your pet's needs.

Weight problems also frequently result from inactivity, so it is 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—provided your veterinarian approves—is an excellent place to start for many canine companions. And while most cats typically won't tolerate leash walking, regular play periods with fun toys, such as a laser pointer or tossed ball, can provide satisfactory activity levels and help maintain their health.

It is also important to realize that certain breeds, especially smaller ones, are more prone to being overweight or obese, as are many senior pets. In extreme old age, however, the situation is often reversed, and weight loss can be the problem.

How Do I Know If My Pet Is Obese?

No matter whether your pet is a dog or a cat, and regardless of what size or breed it is, you should be able to feel its ribs. Many owners mistakenly think that the ability to feel ribs means their pet is too thin. In reality, being able to feel some ribs is a sign that your pet is at a healthy weight. Additionally, when you look down at your pet's back, you should be able to see a distinct "waist" where the body narrows, just behind the rib cage and in front of the hindquarters. 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.

Did you know that a single dog biscuit can contribute as much as an extra 100 calories per day to a dog's diet?

Veterinarians typically use a measurement called a *body condition scale*, or *body condition score*, to assess whether a pet is underweight, overweight, or just right (healthy). Your veterinarian can use this scale to show you the proper way to assess your pet's weight.

Overcoming Obesity

Despite the fact that obesity is generally due to a very simple problem—too much food!—it can be frustratingly difficult to solve. You need to enlist your veterinarian's help.

First, your veterinarian will give your pet a thorough physical examination and ask you for a complete nutritional history. The more specific your answers are, the better your veterinarian will understand how to approach your pet's weight problem.

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! You may be surprised to learn that the daily "treat or two" you think your pet is getting is really four, five, or six. Also be sure to keep track of any tidbits you give during training sessions or when encouraging a pet to take medication, such as hiding a pill in a piece of cheese.

Weight loss is difficult, and it can take a long time, but following your veterinarian's recommendations regarding special diets, portion control, treat modification, and any prescribed exercise programs will help make your pet's weight loss program a healthy success. Be sure to keep any recommended follow-up appointments so that your veterinarian can track your pet's progress and adjust any recommendations. ♦

A Caution for Cats

Never begin a weight loss program for your cat without first consulting your veterinarian. Cats are prone to a disease called *feline hepatic lipidosis* (fatty liver), in which the liver accumulates a large amount of fat and cannot function properly. It is a serious disease that can be fatal. Greatly restricting a cat's diet or changing the diet to one that an obese cat will not eat can lead to the development of this disease.