

## Obesity in Dogs

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### *Introduction*

Obesity is on the increase in the UK pet population. Associated with obesity are health complications such as diabetes, heart disease, liver disease, respiratory disease and joint problems. Overweight animals with arthritis are often in constant pain with the extra weight they must carry around. This article attempts to unravel fact from fiction in understanding this serious medical problem thereby helping owners getting their animals back to ideal weight.

### *Facts about Fat*

- Fat is a rich source of energy. Per unit of weight it contains over double the amount of energy when compared to proteins or carbohydrates. When food energy is available in plenty then fat is laid down in the body. This is then converted back to energy when it is needed.
- Fat is stored in various places in the body. It is associated with internal organs such as the liver and kidneys, but is also laid down under the skin.
- Although fat is often looked upon negatively, it is actually a very important nutritional requirement in animal diets. As well as supplying energy, fats contribute to palatability and carry essential fatty acids and fat soluble vitamins. A deficiency of these components can lead to impaired wound healing, poor coat condition and dry skin.
- The fact that fats are so palatable means that they are often included in commercial diets at high levels to make the food more appealing to the animal.

## ***How Do We Define Obesity***

Determining obesity in pets is often subjective. This is because there is a large variation in breed and size. Your veterinary surgeon will assess your animal on the basis of size, frame and body condition score. Feeling over the ribs and abdomen gives the best indication since this is where a lot of fat will accumulate. In an animal of normal weight the ribs should be easily felt when running your hands over the chest. The abdomen should tuck up in a nice line from the chest up to the hips. Excess abdominal fat causes a rounding of the abdomen which many pet owners think is normal.

You may not believe your vet when he says your pet is overweight but the fact is they most probably are. Your pet should reach their adult weight when they are 1-2 years old. Their weight shouldn't really increase after this age, unless they are getting fat.

## ***Reasons for Pet Obesity***

- Excess dietary energy
- Inappropriate diet
- Inappropriate tit bits and treats.
- Bad behaviour (begging, stealing)
- Inadequate exercise
- Breed susceptibility
- Neutering
- Underlying disease (very rare)

Many commercial pet foods have high levels of fat which is incorporated into the diet to lend palatability. This highly palatable energy dense diet is essentially concentrated nutrition which often needs to be fed in smaller amounts than is actually given. However many owners don't understand this and so tend to overfeed. Most commercial pet food companies also use grain as the main component of the food since this is cheap. Grain is essentially mainly carbohydrate which increases the energy content of the food even further. Cats and dogs in the wild wouldn't usually eat a diet so heavily based on carbohydrate so in a domestic situation they are being subjected to a diet which tends them towards obesity.

### ***Tit Bits and Treats***

Tit bits are often the greatest problem in the fight against obesity. Owners often aren't even aware how much they feed their animal. A common protest is

“.....but they hardly eat anything!!”

Be honest! Even though you don't think your feeding a lot of food the majority of pets will get tit bits. These are essentially extra energy that your pet isn't using. There are usually other members of the family that are giving tit-bits that you may not even be aware of. Children are especially prone to feeding a little bit of what they are eating. You must also consider the size of your pet. Giving a biscuit to a small dog is equivalent to us eating the whole packet!

Extra food → extra energy → fat deposition → obesity

Instead of feeding treats, try and reserve a small portion of the daily allocated food to use as rewards. Remember to reward desirable behaviour and not begging. If you must give treats then give healthy treats which are low in carbohydrate and fat. A small piece of lean meat is better than a biscuit.

### ***Behavioural Problems***

Behavioural problems can lead to obesity. Pets that beg or steal food are more likely to overeat. One of the greatest mistakes owners make is to give treats to begging pets. This is essentially rewarding an undesirable behaviour, your pet will soon learn that begging is something they should do and they will think that this is what you want them to do.

Dominant pets in multi pet households may be more prone to eating more food since they have priority at the food bowl. Some owners are not even aware that one pet is eating much more than the other.

Some pets are just plain greedy and will eat any food left by other pets in the house!! If this is the case then you must feed your pets separately. If you normally leave food down for your pets then you may have to start taking it up after 30 minutes or so. Your pet will soon learn that they only have a certain time to eat. This will allow you to regain control of your pets feeding habits.

### ***Inadequate Exercise***

Exercise requirements vary between species, breed and life-stage of the animal. As people become under increasing pressure with work and lifestyle commitments they often have less time to spend exercising their pet. It is a sad fact but when people have children, their pet often becomes less of a priority.

People are often attracted to breeds of dog for their physical characteristics such as the way they look and their temperament. Unfortunately this breed may be a completely unsuitable choice as they have massive exercise and space requirements. People have to consider what that breed was initially used for. Working breeds are designed to work hard for long periods of time, therefore their exercise requirements are often way above what the average working person can provide.

Cats are often kept as indoor pets, especially in the city and built up areas where the risk of road traffic accidents is high enough to keep them indoors. These cats must be provided with exercise to prevent them becoming obese. Time must be dedicated to play with these cats so provide them with exercise periods. See our exercise section for tips on [exercising cats](#).

### ***Breed Susceptibility- Genetics.***

It seems that in veterinary practice some breeds of dog are more commonly seen overweight than others. Among these are Labradors and Spaniels. It seems that some breeds may have a genetic susceptibility to obesity. Large appetites have a role to play as do differences in metabolism. Some individuals have a higher percentage body fat than dogs of the same weight.

In these susceptible dogs it is more important than ever to control their energy intake and their exercise regime. Increasing fibre levels in the food is often used to give the food bulk and to help prevent overeating of energy dense food.

## *Neutering*

Neutering is an essential part of responsible pet ownership but is thought by some to increase the risk of weight gain. Providing your pet is on a strictly controlled diet and is getting adequate exercise then the risks of obesity are minimised. It is usually a combination of factors including feeding and exercise which can lead to obesity, not just being neutered.

## *Underlying disease*

Conditions which cause a reduction in ability to exercise can lead to obesity. Common examples of diseases of the joints are [arthritis](#), [hip dysplasia](#) and [patella luxation](#).

Other underlying diseases occur which can cause obesity. Diseases such as **hypothyroidism** and [Cushing's disease](#). However, these diseases are rare and are often associated with clinical signs other than obesity. Owners with obese animals should be focused on the common causes of obesity before these rare reasons are investigated.

## *Action Plan for Obese pets*

- Think positively!! Weight loss requires common sense and commitment.
- Set realistic targets. Weight loss should be gradual and healthy.... But continuous!
- Work closely with your veterinary surgeon. Be honest about feeding habits!
- Pick suitable exercise for your pet
- Keep food and exercise diaries, every detail should be logged.
- Get the family involved. Educate them not to undo all your good work (and that's not just the children!)
- Implement lifestyle changes gradually. Over-exercising can lead to injuries.
- Stick to your regime! Don't feel cruel by changing dietary habits, your pet's health is at stake.
- Recondition yourself! Feeding inappropriate treats to an obese pet is not kind. It is cruel and will shorten their lifespan!

## *Weight Loss Techniques*

- The most important factors in any weight loss programme are consistency and commitment. Your pet's whole lifestyle often needs changing, and these changes need to be adhered to in order to make them effective.
- Simple diet changes are only part of the solution and owners must explore changes in exercise routine and behaviour also.
- Try splitting the daily portion of food into two or three meals instead of feeding just once a day. This can increase your pet's metabolic rate and help burn energy rather than storing it as fat. Use a part of this daily portion as treats to be given as rewards for good behaviour. This reduces the tendency to give extra food.
- Prescription diet foods can be used to attempt weight loss. However exercise regimes still need to be put in place. This is extremely important to ensure that any weight that is lost isn't put straight back on again when reverting to a normal diet. Ask your veterinary surgeons advice on feeding these foods.
- People often fail as they feel they are depriving their pet, and so they give in to treats. It must be remembered that a healthy pet is a happy pet and part of responsible ownership is to provide a nutritious diet. You must take control of your pets feeding habits because no-one else will!
- Try incorporating more frequent exercise into a daily routine. A few short periods of exercise throughout the day may do more for increasing the metabolic rate than just one long period of exercise.
- Severe obesity and/or arthritis can make exercise difficult and painful for the animal. Try swimming in the form of [hydrotherapy](#) to lose some of your pet's weight and get the programme started. You will be amazed at how your pets willingness and ability to exercise returns with the loss of only a few kilogram's.
- Instead of treats, give rewards such as praise or affection. These are just as important to your pet and help strengthen the bond between you. Respond to their begging with a walk or instigate some play activity. Not only does this burn calories but it also satisfies their need for attention.

Try and incorporate all of the above techniques in your fight against your pet's obesity. Understand that the process of weight loss is a long one, sometimes frustrating but ultimately very satisfying and rewarding. Some people find the process of creating a lifestyle plan for their pet a good way to address their own lifestyle issues. Why not incorporate some of your own lifestyle changes into the plan. Your chances of success may be better if your best friend is at your side.