

Trimming the Fat

Obesity is a costly condition for owners, financially and in terms of the animal's health

by Kelly Smith

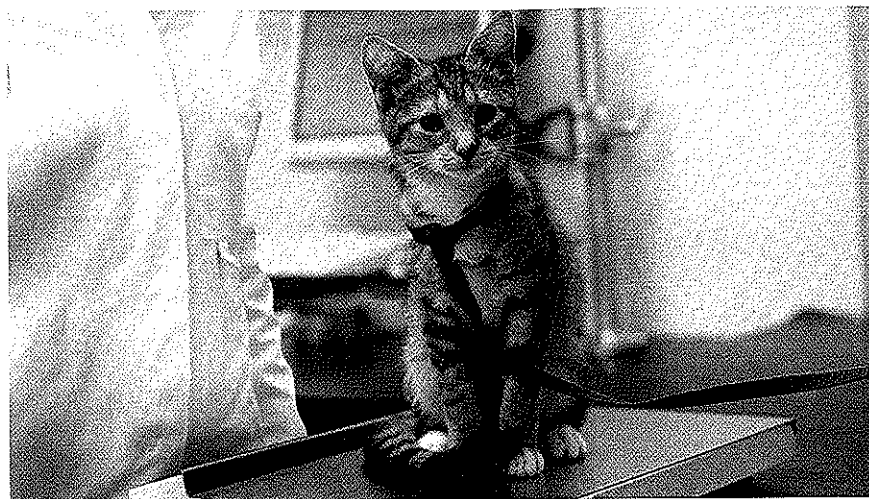
The statistics around animal obesity are shocking. According to figures from the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOPOP) and the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, an estimated 52.6 percent of the nation's 83.3 million dogs are overweight or obese; of our 95.6 million cats, an estimated 57.6 percent are overweight or obese. That's more than 98 million animals at an unhealthy weight out of an estimated dog and cat population of 178.9 million. The fact that there are roughly 148 million overweight Americans lends credence to the notion that there may be a correlation between overweight pet owners and their pets.

"Among all diseases that perplex the veterinary community and plague our population of pets, obesity has the greatest collective negative impact on pet health, and yet it is almost completely avoidable," said Ernie Ward, DVM, veterinarian and founder of APOPOP. "The pet industry is mighty and well-meaning, but it's time we stop accepting the status quo. We must start working together to fight obesity through knowledge and action."

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who are committed to healthy lifestyles for both animals and people. A key component of their mission is to develop and promote parallel weight loss programs designed to help pet owners lose weight alongside their pets.

The risks

Susan Little, DVM, has been in feline practice since 1990 and is part owner of two feline specialty practices in Ottawa, Canada. She is the incoming 2015 president of the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) and a past board member for the Winn Feline Foundation. Little says, “The best known risk of obesity in cats, especially middle-age male cats, is diabetes mellitus. Other health risks have been documented in studies, such as increased risk of cancer, dental disease, skin diseases, lameness, and lower urinary tract disease. Risks that are not often considered, but are important, include impairment of a veterinarian’s ability to perform a thorough physical examination of the abdomen and lymph nodes, difficulties with some diagnostic tests (e.g., drawing blood and urine samples,

X-rays), and impaired ability to breathe under anesthesia,” she says.

Carol McConnell, DVM, MBA, is vice president and the chief veterinary medical officer at Veterinary Pet Insurance (VPI). Prior to joining VPI in 2004, McConnell worked in the biomedical industry and practiced at a Delaware veterinary hospital. She is the recipient of several awards, including an AVMA award for promoting the veterinary profession. “I am so happy to see the veterinary community take this on so resolutely. We have all been complaining about obese pets for years, but now we are actively working to help our clients turn this around for the good of the pets we all love,” she says.

VPI’s 2012 database of 485,000 insured pets revealed the following top 10 dog and cat obesity-related conditions.

Common dog obesity-related conditions:

- Osteoarthritis
- Cystitis or urinary tract infection
- Soft tissue trauma

- Hypothyroidism
- Hepatitis or hepatopathy
- Cruciate ligament injury
- Intervertebral disc disease
- Diabetes
- Congestive heart failure
- Chronic renal disease

Common cat obesity-related conditions:

- Cystitis or urinary tract infection
- Chronic renal disease
- Diabetes
- Asthma
- Hepatitis or hepatopathy
- Hypertension
- Osteoarthritis
- Soft tissue trauma
- Congestive heart failure
- Gall bladder disorder

According to a recent AAHA blog post by McConnell, many pet owners are not aware that being overweight is a primary factor in the need for surgical intervention in two common conditions: canine cruciate ligament ruptures and luxating patellas. These surgeries can create suffering for the animal and a financial cost to the pet owner, offering a further incentive for owners to help their pet achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

The VPI reports that the top 10 breeds at risk of cruciate and/or meniscus injuries include those that most practitioners would expect to see: Labrador and golden retrievers, German shepherd dogs, rottweilers, and Pit bull terriers, along with bulldogs, Yorkshire terriers, and bichon frises. Mixed breeds hold the number-one spot, suggesting that the problems are spread among dogs of all shapes and sizes.

In her post, McConnell says, “These dogs will become long-term sufferers

of osteoarthritis, which is itself made worse by obesity." In discussing osteoarthritis at a recent veterinary conference, board-certified surgeons from the North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine pointed out that osteoarthritis is a leading cause of death in pets, because owners can't bear to watch older pets suffering and choose instead to euthanize. They cited weight loss as a primary treatment option for osteoarthritis.

Communication is key

The risks of obesity and the benefits of maintaining a healthy weight are clear; how best can a veterinarian communicate the importance of this information to clients, though? "Clients often need to receive information in multiple formats for it to make an impact," says Little. "Today's pet owners need to be reached not only with written information in the clinic but also messages including photos and videos on social media. Telling clients stories and showing photos of real patients with obesity-related diseases (with the owner's permission) can be a powerful way to bring home specific risks."

For McConnell, "The first step is simply having the conversation. It can be difficult to discuss a pet's obesity with a client, especially if there are other factors, such as the practitioner's or client's weight. We need to get past that, and make it clear we aren't making a moral judgment, but rather a medical one.

"Next, we need to define terms," she says. "We know from studies and our own clinical experience that many people simply do not know what a lean, healthy dog looks like."

She relates a colleague's story: "I know a veterinary technician with a gorgeous yellow Labrador retriever. Harvey is fit, lean, and muscular, a perfect match for this woman's active outdoor lifestyle. But people constantly comment on how 'ribby' her dog is, and ask if he had been abused and recently rescued. Some of these people, of course, own dogs who are obese—and they don't recognize it. That's why we need to explain and show them during preventive care exams what we are looking for in terms of body condition score (BCS). As we're explaining, we need to discuss the diseases that obese pets are at risk for, and discuss the cost—in terms of suffering, shortened lifespan, and money—these issues represent." She relates the importance of having a weight loss plan. "Don't send clients home and tell them 'to take weight off the pet.' Give them a plan, and give them support," she says.

Strategy

The risks are known, and the client is willing to play a more positive role in managing an animal's weight; below are some strategies veterinarians can use to help ensure success for both the client and the animal.

For cats, Little encourages the use of food puzzles, along with finding a way to increase the cat's exercise level, usually through scheduled play sessions. In addition, she says that "veterinarians must know how to calculate the estimated amount of daily calories for weight loss based on ideal body weight and must prescribe a diet designed for weight loss." Teaching owners to apportion a cat's daily food allotment by weight rather than by volume can also be useful.



Tastes like



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"Veterinarians should spend more time and effort on educating owners early in a cat's life to prevent obesity," says Little. "This includes information on adjusting food intake when the kitten is leaving its growth phase and after surgical sterilization, when we know caloric needs drop sharply. Owners also need instruction on meal feeding and using food toys or puzzles. An ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure!"

McConnell says, "The two things few pet owners seem to do is read labels and measure food. The caloric density between two different dog foods can be significant... even different flavors within the same brand line can have vastly different calories." She explains that, since people are now used to

reading labels on their own foods, it shouldn't be too difficult to teach them to do the same for their pets.

She advises against both "eyeball" portions (such as, perhaps, using a coffee cup with a broken handle to measure) and free-feeding. "Make sure your clients are measuring their pets' rations with a measuring cup," she says. "Explain to clients that many pets can count, but they can't measure. If a pet has been trained to expect treats at certain times of the day, or three treats before bed, make those treats very, very tiny." Clients can find training treats at pet supply retailers that are tiny but delicious to pets.

Educating clients and offering resources, as McConnell states

it, has "the emotional appeal of a longer life for pets coupled with less suffering, both acute (post-surgical) and chronic (from osteoarthritis). Cost savings will also result from preventing the need for surgeries as well as from avoiding a lifetime of treatment for a chronic condition. Add in lower food costs, and it all adds up to a strong case for keeping pets at a healthy, normal weight." ※



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Online Resources

AAHA publishes nutritional assessment guidelines and evaluation forms to assist veterinarians in providing high-quality nutritional information to clients. Visit the links below:

aaha.org/public_documents/professional/guidelines/nutritionevaluationform.pdf

aaha.org/professional/resources/nutritional_assessment.aspx

AAHA also offers a variety of brochures, client handouts, and other links for veterinarians:

aaha.org/professional/resources/weight_management_resources.aspx

petobesityprevention.org is the website of the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP). The group fights pet obesity within the veterinary medical community, veterinary schools, and state and local veterinary organizations, and it has reached out to various media outlets. APOP is not affiliated with any veterinary industry corporation or business; that neutrality is critical to the group's ability to provide unbiased information to veterinary health care providers and the public.

APOP offers a variety of data about pet obesity; visit this link for more information:

petobesityprevention.org/pet-obesity-fact-risks/

Each fall, APOP conducts a Pet Obesity Awareness Day survey. That day, they ask veterinarians to record simple information for each pet on which they perform a routine examination. If you are interested in participating, visit the petobesityprevention.org website and search "Pet Obesity Awareness Day."