

Measuring the Benefits of Weight Loss



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How does body condition influence the risk of chronic diseases? At what point do the effects of obesity become particularly damaging?

Obesity is the number one malnutrition issue in pets today, particularly for senior dogs. Nearly every disease or malady common to senior pets, from cancer to osteoarthritis, is affected by obesity.

Anything above a body condition score of 5 is generally considered overweight. The higher the score, the worse the effects become. Increases in obesity are tied to increases in the incidence of disease processes as well as the earlier onset of those processes. Obesity in dogs is associated with orthopedic, urinary and dermatologic diseases, among several others.^{1,2,3}

Proper weight management is key to controlling a number of disease processes. Unfortunately, this is easy in theory but difficult in practice. Pet owners equate food with love, and treats provide immediate gratification.

What should veterinarians recommend as an ideal body condition score for dogs?

According to the 9-point Purina Body Condition Score (BCS) Chart, the "ideal" BCS is 4 to 5. This means that the dog's ribs should be easily palpable and an abdominal "tuck" should be present. However, most people associate a dog with a BCS of 4 as "underfed" or "too thin." Instead, owners have come to see the physique of a burly, barrel-chested Labrador as normal and are uncomfortable with the thought of feeling a hip or rib bone on their dogs.

How important is prevention compared to intervention?

Prevention takes precedence. Conversations about body condition should begin with the puppy's first trip to the Vet. Unfortunately, many veterinarians initially focus only on the issues of vaccinations and neutering. Teaching owners about responsible feeding and maintaining proper body condition can be equally important to the dog's long-term health.

Forming good habits early helps put pets and their owners on the right path. Owners should learn to calculate the calories a dog needs based on life stage, disease process and breed, while taking treats into account. Depending on an individual dog's body condition, these recommendations can be tailored.

Intervention is needed when a dog's body condition exceeds 5 on the 9-point scale. At this point, obesity-related conditions such as joint disease and urinary stones become more common.

Owners can be easily discouraged when confronting their pet's obesity; rather than just giving a pill, they must change how they feed their dog while increasing its activity. As a simple first step, I recommend that owners start with a goal of reducing their pet's body weight by 10%.

This incremental loss is sufficient to mitigate a range of problems, while feeling less overwhelming for owners as they make lifestyle changes.

What role do weight loss diets play in weight management?

To many clients, weight loss diets mean nothing more than lower calories. In truth, these diets are high in protein to preserve lean muscle mass and low-calorie to help achieve weight loss better than everyday over-the-counter diets. It's up to us as practitioners to take a firm stance on how specific diets assist the weight management process and share those beliefs with our clients. Weight loss diets also help clients accept greater accountability for their pets' weight loss. Requiring patients return to the clinic for more pet food provides another opportunity for us to monitor progress and make any necessary adjustments.

WHAT IS YOUR DOG'S BODY CONDITION SCORE?

Simply note how the ribs, belly and waist feel and compare them to the chart below.

UNDERWEIGHT	
1	Ribs, spine and pelvic bones are evident from a distance. No body fat. Obvious muscle mass loss.
2	Ribs, spine, and pelvic bones are easily visible. No tangible fat and minor muscle mass loss.
3	Ribs are easily felt. Tops of vertebrae and pelvic bones are becoming prominent. Obvious waist and abdominal tuck.
IDEAL WEIGHT	
4	Ribs are easily felt with minimal fat covering them. Waist and an abdominal tuck are easily noted.
5	Ribs are felt without excess fat covering them. Waist can be seen from above and an abdominal tuck is seen from the side.
OVERWEIGHT	
6	Ribs can be felt with slight excess fat covering them. Waist can be seen from above, but it isn't prominent. Some abdominal tuck is present.
7	Ribs can be felt with difficulty. There are noticeable fat deposits at the lower back. Waist is absent or barely visible, and some abdominal tuck is present.
8	Ribs can't be felt under the fat, or they can be felt with significant pressure. There are heavy fat deposits at the lower back. No waist and obvious abdominal distension may be present.
9	Massive fat deposits at the neck, spine, base of tail, and even the legs. Obvious abdominal distension.

1. Frye CW, Shmalberg JW, Wakshlag JJ. Obesity, Exercise and Orthopedic Disease. Vet Clin North Am Small Anim Pract. 2016 Jun 9. pii: S0195-5616(16)30022-5. doi:10.1016/j.jcvsm.2016.04.006.
2. Tvarijonaviute A, Ceron JJ, Holden SL, Biourge V, Morris PJ, German AJ. Effect of weight loss in obese dogs on indicators of renal function or disease. J Vet Intern Med. 2013 Jan-Feb;27(1):31-8. doi:10.1111/jvim.12029. Epub 2012 Dec 26.
3. German AJ. The growing problem of obesity in cats and dogs. J Nutr. 2006 Jul;136(7 Suppl):1940S-1946S.

Helping Pets Keep Weight Off



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We recommend weight loss for overweight patients because many health conditions, including feline diabetes, certain respiratory issues and osteoarthritis, are either caused or compounded by obesity. Therefore, once patients successfully lose weight, we must continue to work with clients to ensure their pets do not regain weight.

Counseling clients about weight maintenance

Once an overweight dog or cat has achieved a desirable weight and body condition, it can be easy for owners to relax their discipline and diligence, and lapse into old feeding behaviors.

Variations in genetics, and differences in metabolism and activity levels can affect exact recommendations, but in most pets, energy requirements are fairly low following weight loss.¹ In one study, the mean post-weight-loss energy requirement was only 10 percent higher than the energy requirement for weight loss.¹ This means a dog that achieved ideal weight by eating 500 calories per day may only need 550 calories to maintain that weight.

Purina Life Span Study

14-Year Study Showed Benefits of Lean Feeding

The Purina Life Span Study was the first completed study of its kind to examine the effects of feeding dogs to a lean body condition vs. control throughout their lives.¹ It was conducted by Purina researchers in St. Louis and lasted 14 years.

Forty-eight 8-week-old Labrador Retrievers (24 pairs of littermates) were enrolled. Dogs were paired according to gender and body weight and randomly assigned to a control or lean-fed group. Dogs in the lean-fed group were fed 25% less than their paired littermates and maintained in lean body condition. All dogs received the same 100% complete and balanced food; only the amount fed differed.

Study findings

The study revealed that feeding to an ideal body condition over a lifetime can significantly extend a dog's healthy years.¹

- Lean-fed dogs experienced extended healthy years compared to the control dogs.
- Lean-fed dogs had healthier blood glucose levels, blood pressures and heart rates.
- Lean-fed dogs had a delayed need for treatment of chronic conditions. Dogs in the control group required long-term treatment for osteoarthritis a full 3 years earlier than their lean counterparts.

1. Kealy RD, Lawler DF, Ballam JM et al. Effects of diet restriction on life span and age-related changes in dogs. J Am Vet Med Assoc. 2002 May 1;220(9):1315-20.

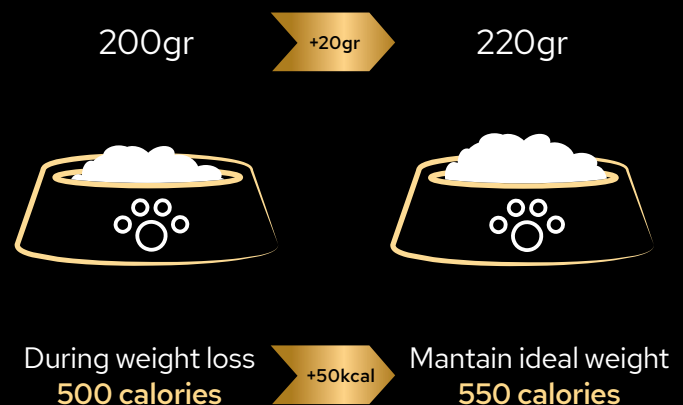
Exercise, diet or both?

Exercise increases energy expenditure and helps maintain muscle mass. It also allows the pet and owner to bond in a positive manner that does not focus on food. Unfortunately, owner compliance regarding exercise can be challenging.

Diet is a very important factor in post-weight-loss maintenance. Since caloric requirements typically remain low, a lower-calorie food with a high protein-to-calorie ratio, such as Purina® Pro Plan® Veterinary Diets OM Obesity Management® Canine or Feline Formulas, may be an appropriate choice. Owners must continue to feed measured amounts of food, weigh their pets and adjust feeding amounts to maintain lean body condition.

Treats do have a place in a weight maintenance plan. The 2014 American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) Weight Management Guidelines for Dogs and Cats recommend limiting treats to no more than 10 percent of the overall calories in the diet.² Excessive treats can lead to weight gain and/or potentially a nutrient deficient or unbalanced diet.

Ongoing client communication and monitoring by veterinarians and veterinary staff members also are key to successful weight loss and weight maintenance. Let clients know that they can come into your clinic monthly and weigh their pets. It's a great practice builder and a great relationship builder, too.



1. German AJ, et al. Low-maintenance energy requirements of obese dogs after weight loss. Br J Nutr; Vol. 106, Supplement S1, October 2011, pp S93-S96.
2. Brooks D, Churchill J, Fein K et al. 2014 Weight Management Guidelines for Dogs and Cats. JAAHA. Vol. 50(1). Jan/Feb 2014, pp 1-11.

Successful Weight Loss: It Takes Two



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Without a shared commitment between the veterinarian and client, patients will never lose the weight they need. Here's my approach to partnering with clients:

Be compassionate. Overfeeding, feeding table scraps and feeding too many treats usually come from a place of love. Owners simply don't understand that seemingly small portions of people food can have very high calorie counts.

Owners also may not see the problem and require tactful education. Pet obesity is so prevalent that an overweight pet may appear normal to the owner.

Start simple. After having the client explain how and what they are feeding their overweight pet, I strive for small, simple changes. The goals are:

- Feed an appropriate diet. This may mean switching the pet to a therapeutic weight-loss diet.
- Measure the feedings. Have clients use an actual measuring cup and give them a precise recommendation of how much to feed and how often.
- Re-check weight in 1-2 months. This gives the owner time to form new behaviours and to start seeing results. If progress is not noted, further adjustments can be made.

Focus on diet first, exercise second. Clients often overestimate the role of exercise in weight management. The truth is that pets can be quite inefficient at burning calories. I prefer that clients turn their focus to diet and understand the value of portion control and their pet's caloric requirements. It's unlikely that owners can provide enough exercise for their pet to overcome an inappropriate diet.

Consider the client's happiness. If a pet is constantly begging for food or if the client believes they are "starving" a beloved family member, the weight-loss programme can quickly be derailed.

Helpful strategies include:

- Feed a food that provides satiety. A high-protein diet with added fibre can help the pet feel fuller—and keep both the pet and owner happier.
- Take a new approach to treats, such as low-calorie vegetables like green beans or carrots.
- Incorporate play with feeding by using a food toy that stimulates the pet and prolongs mealtime.

To go from overweight to a healthy weight, pets need the power of two: a veterinarian to make the right feeding recommendations, and an owner who will consistently follow through.

Key Takeaways

- Increases in obesity are tied to both the incidence and earlier onset of chronic diseases.
- Because it is easier to prevent than correct obesity, conversations about weight management should start at a puppy or kitten's first veterinary visit.
- Just like weight loss, weight maintenance requires vigilance. Following weight loss, a patient may only require a 10% increase in calories to maintain their ideal body condition.



Give clients precise
recommendations of how much to
feed—and how often.


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