

Pets Are Dying Because Their Owners Aren't Aware of This

It's a tragedy, as almost 54% of the dogs and nearly 59% of the cats we consider our pets are at risk of an early death. The worst part? It doesn't need to be this way if owners would only acknowledge the truth about their beloved pet.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention's (APOP) 2016 clinical survey recently reported that nearly 54% of dogs and 59% of cats are clinically overweight or obese
- Several related diseases and conditions may occur when cats and dogs are overweight or obese, including inflammation, diabetes, heart conditions and metabolic and endocrine disorders, not to mention strain placed on their bones, joints and organs
- The survey was an indication of the disparity between pet owners' ideas of how pets should be fed (and how much) and veterinarians who repeat the same uninformed opinions they've had regarding pet nutrition for years

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published October 12, 2017.

Many people believe the love they have for families and friends is best expressed through food, so serving cake, pie, biscuits and gravy and mounds of meat is considered a love language. Family recipes are sometimes thought to be part of the glue that helps hold loved ones together. Unfortunately, the concept is also extended to pets. In fact, the newest statistics show that over the past several years, pet obesity is getting worse, not better. The sad fact is, obesity continues to be the greatest health threat facing pets today.

According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention's (APOP) 2016 clinical survey, nearly 54% of dogs and 59% of cats were deemed clinically overweight or obese, using the Pet Body Condition Score (BCS). A BCS of 4 equates to overweight, and BCS 5 is obese. According to the organization's website:

"That equals an estimated 41.9 million dogs and 50.5 million cats are too heavy, based on 2016 pet population projections provided by the American Pet Products Association (APPA)."¹

Since 2012, APOP's percentages for overweight and obese dogs have shown a steady climb from 52.5% to 53.9% in 2016. Over the same time frame, there was a slight dip in the percentages for 2013 for cats, but then they climbed and even exceeded the highest numbers ever with a total of 58.9% being obese and overweight.

What Does Excess Fat in Dogs and Cats Mean for Their Health?

In 2014, the American Animal Hospital Association² submitted guidelines for managing the weight of dogs and cats, and noted several related diseases and conditions that may occur when these animals are overweight or obese, such as:

- Skin disorders
- Respiratory problems
- Kidney dysfunction
- Metabolic and endocrine disorders
- Orthopedic disease
- Certain cancers
- Chronic inflammation
- Diminished quality of life

But that's not all. Numerous other diseases are claiming the lives of pets due to obesity, and many are related to the strain placed on their bones and joints, circulatory systems, nerves and organs, such as diabetes, osteoarthritis, hypothyroidism, congestive heart failure and intervertebral disc disease. Not surprisingly, any of these by themselves can make your pet feel miserable, but the worst thing is a reduced life expectancy. Obesity can kill animals just as it does humans.

The sad part of it is, beloved dogs and cats die every day because their caretakers may not be aware that their pets are eating too much. In many cases, they're also not aware that while their dogs and cats might really eat certain things up with gusto, their systems aren't always designed to handle it. Given the chance, some dogs will eat anything they see in front of them just because it's available.

On the other hand, cats may be food addicts, simply because once they get used to something, getting them to switch is a tough sell. Two things pet owners and veterinarians agreed on in the survey by around 95%: An overweight pet is more likely to be experiencing constant pain, and an optimal diet could help them live longer.

Is There a Correlation Between Diet and Weight for Pets?

In a word, yes. Weight management is something that needs to be undertaken for pets just as it is for humans. Excess weight can reduce longevity and affect quality of life. The financial repercussions are serious, too, as veterinarian and APOP founder Dr. Ernie Ward estimated that owners pay tens of millions of dollars in medical costs to treat their animals when eating better food and less of it would have been a much better option from the beginning.

It's quite interesting that 81% of pet owners in the survey, when asked if they thought their pet's health was normal and healthy, said they were. At the same time, 87% of veterinarians thought the weight of the pets they examined were normal and healthy. It may be the unfortunate explanation for one of the most telling statistics APOP recorded in the questionnaire — that veterinary professionals are no longer the first go-to source of advice when pets have a problem.

Part of the issue is that vets oftentimes don't address pet obesity in a straightforward manner with clients. I find this to be a great disservice to pet owners, and those of you who have either visited me for an exam or have been to my lectures know I don't gloss over weight issues, ever. If your dog or cat is fat, it's my job as your vet to:

1. Inform you of this
2. Create a workable plan to address how we will remedy the weight issue
3. Partner with you to achieve this goal
4. Celebrate with you for maintaining an ideal weight at each subsequent exam.

I can't tell you the number of obese pets I've seen and the owners say, "Well I don't know if I believe you because you're the only vet that's ever told me a Chihuahua shouldn't weigh 22 pounds." This means those other vets failed at communicating a very important message to this client.

More and more often, pet owners are trusting their luck to the internet and googling their questions regarding what is safe and healthy for pet nutrition. While this can be a good way to learn more about pet nutrition, it can also be damaging, depending on the source. This statistic may be an indication that pet owners are arming themselves with the latest and best information on what's best to feed cats and dogs — and not feed them — to maintain or gain a healthy weight.

In addition, it seems to be becoming increasingly clear to pet parents that their own veterinary professional is just one of many who stubbornly maintain the same inaccurate and uninformed opinions they've had regarding pet nutrition for years, and that usually means they're sure that feeding pets a processed diet is perfectly fine.

It may be also because some veterinarians "have a dog in the fight," so to speak, regarding what they tell their pet parents to feed their dogs and cats. If you've found that one or more of the smaller companies producing the healthiest pet food brands have been gobbled up by larger companies, there are reasons for that. Genetically engineered, carb-loaded and chemically laced foods are big business for vets, too.

Differences Between Veterinarians and Pet Owners

Interestingly, there's a disparity between what many informed dog and cat owners believe in terms of specific foods or types of foods their pets should be fed and what veterinarians often maintain, APOP notes.

Some differences were quite surprising, such as whether or not corn and grains are OK, or whether a raw or organic diet might have any merit for canines and felines. On the first question, more pet owners said no, and on the second, more veterinarians said no. Regarding chats pet owners have with their veterinarians, APOP noted:

"Both pet owners and veterinary professionals (55 percent) said they worried about the quality of their pet's food affecting the long-term health of their dog or cat ... [but] [o]nly 42 percent of pet owners agreed their veterinarian should recommend a maintenance diet, compared to over 64 percent of veterinarians."

The upshot is that the two groups had quite different ideas regarding the best of ingredients. In addition:

- 61% of pet owners and 25% of veterinarians thought low- or no-grain diets were best for dogs
- 35% of pet owners and just 15% of veterinary professionals believed raw diets are healthier for dogs and cats

- 43% of pet owners and 23% of veterinary professionals believed organic pet foods would be healthier
- 73% of pet owners disagreed that corn is healthy for dogs, while 48% of veterinary professionals thought it was OK

The fact is, what you feed them is the most important decision you make for your pets every day. Weighing them at intervals is also a crucial step in regulating a pet's weight, because it can creep up on them without you ever noticing. You see your pets from day to day, a gradual difference in their weight can be hard to detect.

If you're unsure what your pet is supposed to weigh, you can check the list of ideal weights for pets at Pet Obesity Prevention.³ Weight charts have lots of limitations, so ideally, if you don't know if your pet is overweight, ask your vet. You should be able to feel your pet's ribs:



One thing all pet parents should consider is that most pet food companies over-estimate the amount of food pets need. Those recommendations are reflected on their feeding instructions on the bag, which is why you can't go by how much food the manufacturer recommends you feed. I have many pet parents tell me they feel guilty feeding any less than what the bag says, and that's exactly what the company wants.

When I visited **KetoPet Sanctuary**, they start all of their cancer patients out on 15 calories per pound (CPP) of body weight a day (so a 10-pound dog would eat 150 calories a day); this is less than half of what is recommended on the back of most pet food bags. Caloric control is a key factor in KetoPet achieving the amazing results they have, so the sooner the extra weight is shed, the sooner those dogs' bodies can begin fighting cancer.

Interestingly, KetoPet has also confirmed what we've known to be true for pets and people, but we haven't had the money to "prove" (so they proved it for us, thank you KetoPet!): Fat doesn't make pets (or us) fat, carbs make us fat. KetoPet utilizes a high-fat, low-to-moderate protein, ultra-low-carb diet to slow, halt or reverse some of the most aggressive canine cancers, with tremendous results.

Caloric restriction (I prefer the term caloric control), intermittent fasting, reducing portion size or reducing the number of feedings per day are all excellent strategies to radically improve the health of your overweight pet, it's just hard to put these important concepts into action.

This should be highly motivating to everyone with a heavy pet: the research is clear, animals live longer and with far fewer diseases if they achieve and maintain a healthy body weight. Period. So helping our loved ones diet down to a healthy weight is the kindest thing we can do for our pets.

Pertinent Factors in Pets' Diets and Exercise

Just as it is with humans, there are consequences for implementing (or allowing) a diet for cats and dogs that doesn't take into account the importance of nutrients, detriments of processed pet foods and other pertinent factors. One factor is that dogs and cats require different types of species-appropriate diets. Both are carnivores, but dogs are scavenging carnivores, and cats are obligate carnivores, so there's a difference in the way they should be fed.

Dogs and cats don't have a grain, or carbohydrate, requirement. Their need for starch (aka sugar) is none. Zero. They can thrive with no carbs in their diet, and I recommend pet owners make every effort to reduce the amount of carbohydrates coming from starch in their animals' diets to the best of their ability.

To learn how much sugar is in your pet's food watch my **Facebook Live vlog** on this topic. In a nutshell, add up the protein, fat, fiber, moisture and ash (estimate 6% if your pet food doesn't list it) and subtract from 100: That's the amount of starch (carbs) in your pet food.

Veteran pet food formulator Dr. Richard Patton suggests no cat or dog should consume more than 10% net carbs in their diet for optimal health. It's no surprise then, when the average pet food ranges from 30% to 70% carbs, where the root of the problem lies. Overfeeding carbohydrates found in today's pet foods (tapioca, peas, lentils, potatoes, etc.) are not only the main source of inflammation, diabetes and metabolic issues, it's also the reason so many pets are fat.

This is something, in general, I feel vets don't learn about in vet school. We're taught that it doesn't matter where the source of protein comes from; that soy protein and meat protein both yield amino acids that are identical on paper. But as Dr. Richard Patton says, "a calorie coming from carbohydrates is much more sinful than a calorie coming from steak" for a dog or cat.

Human nutritionists do a much better job of helping their clients understand that there are many aspects of foods that create disease and health, well beyond each food's caloric content and macronutrient ratio. There are important conversations occurring in human nutrition circles discussing lectins, phytates, goitrogens, trypsin inhibitors and estrogens found in soy and soy-based human foods, but notice these conversations are suspiciously absent in veterinary circles?

Part of the reason we don't discuss the role of whole food nutrition in veterinary medicine is because (sadly) most of us aren't feeding whole, fresh foods to pets. Vets that promote dry pet food, by default, advocate feeding leftovers from the human food industry, leftovers from slaughterhouses and leftovers from the grain industry because that's what kibble is.

This means our pets are not eating ingredients classified as "food" at all, but instead are consuming "feed-grade" (not approved from human consumption) raw materials, all blended together with a synthetic mineral mix and labeled as "dog food" or "cat food." Most veterinarians view pet food as required sustenance, but not as a potent weapon against disease. That's because what 96% of vets recommend as "food" won't fight disease at all. In fact, I believe the "food" brands they sell can contribute to the disease process.

For people convinced that a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle is best for themselves, transferring this conviction to your pets is unwise, unhealthy and could even end up being a deadly call to make for your animals.

Pets need protein as much as you do, but they also need to eat the right kind for their systems. But worse is a propensity for pet owners to feed any and all animals human junk foods, packaged pet foods that in many cases are even worse and several toxic around-the-house items uninformed individuals aren't aware they should keep away from their animals.

Species-appropriate, **fresh, whole foods for your pets are always best**. Ideally, when you make them yourself, you know how healthy they are because you know what's in them.

Another tip: Pay close attention to portion control. Animals can gain or lose weight on any food or diet plan, depending on how much you feed them and how much they exercise. Treats are another culprit of quiet calorie accumulation. Make sure treats are meat or veggie based, the size of peas, and constitute no more than 10% of your pet's overall caloric intake.

Finally, dogs need a minimum of 20 minutes a day of exercise that will keep their heart rate up, and more if they're overweight. I recommend you strive for an hour of rigorous exercise a day with your dog.

Cats, of course, are a different animal, but you may find success in buying lasers and other inexpensive toys that will spark interest in reviving some of their latent instincts, such as hunting, and making them work a little for their food. Not only will the results be sleeker, slender, healthier pets, exercise also increases your interaction time with them, which is what they live for.

Sources and References

¹ [APOP 2017](#)

² [AAHA 2014](#)

³ [Pet Obesity Prevention 2017](#)
