

How the 'New Normal' Could Affect Your Pet's Longevity

The pandemic hasn't been kind to many peoples' midsections, and our pets, unfortunately, are no exception. Excess pounds can mean a shorter, decreased quality of life. Understand how obesity negatively affects dogs' and cats' lives, and how to help your pet achieve and maintain her ideal range.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The pet obesity crisis has undoubtedly escalated during the pandemic, but it's also a long-standing problem that never seems to get the attention it requires from pet owners, the pet food industry, or veterinarians
- It's simply a fact that dogs and cats who are overweight/obese develop a host of diseases as a result, and have a lower quality of life, as well as a shorter life than pets at a healthy weight
- Caring for a pet who becomes ill with one or more obesity-related diseases can be extremely costly both financially and emotionally
- The basics of maintaining your pet at a healthy weight include a fresh food diet, well-timed, portion-controlled meals and daily exercise

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According to the most recent Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP) survey, in 2018 an estimated 60% of cats (56 million) and 56% of dogs (50 million) were overweight (26% of cats; 37% of dogs) or obese (34% of cats; 19% of dogs).¹

Since these numbers have been trending upward for several years and given the "pandemic weight gain" in both humans and pets, it's a good bet the 2020 survey results will be significantly worse. And this isn't exclusively a U.S. problem. The U.K. and other countries with developed pet food markets have also recognized the issue.

While some pet parents may be inclined to blame their dog or cat's weight gain on the pandemic, as Debbie Phillips-Donaldson, editor-in-chief of Petfood Industry.com writes in a recent post:

"... pet obesity is not a just recent phenomenon resulting from pet owners spending more time at home with their furry family members and indulging them with more foods and treats. Pet overweight and obesity, often stemming from overfeeding, has been rising for several years."²

Donaldson also makes the point that pandemic or no pandemic, pet obesity has never received the attention it deserves — not from pet parents, the pet food industry, or even veterinarians. According to the APOP survey, while almost 70% of pet owners would like diet-related advice from their vets, less than 40% have received it.

And this is despite the fact that overweight and obesity can lead to multiple health problems in dogs and cats. According to Nationwide Pet Insurance, 2020 was the ninth year in a row that claims for conditions linked to or made worse by obesity rose, accounting for 20% of all claims and over \$90 million in veterinary expenses.³

Too Much Weight = Shorter, Lower Quality Lives

The following are the top 10 most common dog and cat obesity-related conditions according to Nationwide:⁴

Most Common Obesity-Related Conditions in Dogs

- Arthritis
- Low thyroid hormone
- Bladder/urinary tract disease
- Diseased disc in spine
- Soft tissue trauma
- Diabetes
- Torn ligaments in knee
- Chronic kidney disease
- Liver disease
- Heart failure

Most Common Obesity-Related Conditions in Cats

- Bladder/urinary tract disease
- Arthritis
- Chronic kidney disease
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Soft tissue trauma
- Liver disease
- Heart failure
- Asthma
- Gall bladder disorder

Many of these conditions can take years off your pet's life and destroy the quality of daily life along the way. The financial implications are serious, too, since it's estimated that pet parents pay tens of millions of dollars in medical costs to treat their animals for obesity-related conditions, when simply eating better food and less of it would have been a much better option all the way around.

Aim for a Body Condition Score of 5

One of the problems contributing to the epidemic of pet obesity is that overweight dogs and cats have become the "new normal" and as a result, many pet parents are now "fat blind." If you're not sure about your own furry family member, look down at him from above. You should be able to see a tapered-in waist. If he's oval-shaped, chances are he's too heavy. You should also be able to feel (but not see) his ribs as well as the bones near the base of the tail.

Of course, if he's obese, you'll see noticeable amounts of excess fat on the abdomen, hips and neck. Also compare him to these easy-to-understand body condition charts provided by the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA):



Body Condition Score





1 **3**



5



7 **9**

UNDER IDEAL

- 1 Ribs, lumbar vertebrae, pelvic bones and all bony prominences evident from a distance. No discernible body fat. Obvious loss of muscle mass.
- 2 Ribs, lumbar vertebrae and pelvic bones easily visible. No palpable fat. Some evidence of other bony prominences. Minimal loss of muscle mass.
- 3 Ribs easily palpated and may be visible with no palpable fat. Tops of lumbar vertebrae visible. Pelvic bones becoming prominent. Obvious waist and abdominal tuck.

IDEAL

- 4 Ribs easily palpable, with minimal fat covering. Waist easily noted, viewed from above. Abdominal tuck evident.
- 5 Ribs palpable without excess fat covering. Waist observed behind ribs when viewed from above. Abdomen tucked up when viewed from side.

OVER IDEAL

- 6 Ribs palpable with slight excess fat covering. Waist is discernible viewed from above but is not prominent. Abdominal tuck apparent.
- 7 Ribs palpable with difficulty; heavy fat cover. Noticeable fat deposits over lumbar area and base of tail. Waist absent or barely visible. Abdominal tuck may be present.
- 8 Ribs not palpable under very heavy fat cover, or palpable only with significant pressure. Heavy fat deposits over lumbar area and base of tail. Waist absent. No abdominal tuck. Obvious abdominal distention may be present.
- 9 Massive fat deposits over thorax, spine and base of tail. Waist and abdominal tuck absent. Fat deposits on neck and limbs. Obvious abdominal distention.

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Dogs Body Condition Score Chart



Body Condition Score



UNDER IDEAL

- 1 Ribs visible on shorthaired cats. No palpable fat. Severe abdominal tuck. Lumbar vertebrae and wings of ilia easily palpated.
- 2 Ribs easily visible on shorthaired cats. Lumbar vertebrae obvious. Pronounced abdominal tuck. No palpable fat.
- 3 Ribs easily palpable with minimal fat covering. Lumbar vertebrae obvious. Obvious waist behind ribs. Minimal abdominal fat.
- 4 Ribs palpable with minimal fat covering. Noticeable waist behind ribs. Slight abdominal tuck. Abdominal fat pad absent.

IDEAL

- 5 Well-proportioned. Observe waist behind ribs. Ribs palpable with slight fat covering. Abdominal fat pad minimal.

OVER IDEAL

- 6 Ribs palpable with slight excess fat covering. Waist and abdominal fat pad distinguishable but not obvious. Abdominal tuck absent.
- 7 Ribs not easily palpated with moderate fat covering. Waist poorly discernible. Obvious rounding of abdomen. Moderate abdominal fat pad.
- 8 Ribs not palpable with excess fat covering. Waist absent. Obvious rounding of abdomen with prominent abdominal fat pad. Fat deposits present over lumbar area.
- 9 Ribs not palpable under heavy fat cover. Heavy fat deposits over lumbar area, face and limbs. Distention of abdomen with no waist. Extensive abdominal fat deposits.

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Cats Body Condition Score Chart

The goal for both dogs and cats is a body condition score of 5. And don't assume your pet isn't overweight simply because your veterinarian doesn't mention it. For a number of reasons, many vets fail to address the slow but consistent weight gain that occurs over time and contributes to so many degenerative diseases that could be avoided with appropriate weight management.

In my opinion, if your dog or cat is too heavy, it's my job as your veterinarian to advise you of this, create a plan to help your pet lose weight, partner with you to achieve the goals we set, and celebrate with you as your dog or cat shows up slimmer (and therefore healthier) at follow-up exams.

How to Get Your Fat Pet to an Ideal Weight and Hold the Line

DON'T feed a starch-heavy, carbohydrate-laden processed diet — Ultraprocessed pet foods are a significant contributor to the pet obesity epidemic in the U.S. Many pet parents overfeed, but very often the problem is also the quality of food they're offering in addition to the quantity.

If you're feeding a dry diet, while it might be free of grains, it can't be free of carbs, because carbs are necessary to form kibble. If you look at the package label, you'll see potato, sweet potato, lentils, peas (pea starch), chickpeas, tapioca and/or other carbohydrate sources. Starch breaks down into sugar, even though you don't see sugar on the pet food package label. Carbs that aren't burned for energy are stored as fat.

Many dry pet foods are loaded with carbs (40 to 50% of total content in some cases), which can lead to blood sugar fluctuations, insulin resistance, obesity, diabetes and other health problems in pets. Carb intake above the daily needs of your pet (less than 10%) activates internal enzyme factors that go to work storing the excess as body fat. You can use this **carb equation** to calculate the digestible net carbs in your pet's current diet.

DO feed your pet fresh food — Cats and dogs need food high in animal protein and moisture, with low to no grain or starch content (which is pretty much the opposite of what dry pet foods offer, especially grain-free kibble).

A high-quality fresh food diet is the best choice for pets who need to lose weight. It's important to adequately nourish their bodies as weight loss occurs, making sure their requirements for key amino acids, essential fatty acids and other nutrients are met.

The key to healthy weight loss is to meet your pet's nutritional requirements through a balanced diet but feed less food (portion control) and more exercise, which forces his body to burn fat stores. The first step is to transition him to a diet free of potatoes, corn, rice, soy and tapioca to get the carb content down to a biologically correct value of no more than 20% with a goal of less than 10% for healthy dogs and cats.

My best recommendation is a nutritionally optimal homemade fresh food diet of lean meats, healthy fats, plus fibrous vegetables and low glycemic fruits as the only sources of carbohydrates. These "healthy" carbs are the perfect way to maintain your pet's microbiome, while providing fiber, antioxidants and phytonutrients.

Homemade diets give you ultimate quality control over the ingredients going into your pet's bowl. If you can't prepare your pet's meals, partner with a transparent company happy to discuss ingredient sourcing and quality control with you.

DON'T free feed — Also known as feeding ad libitum or the all-day all-they-can-eat buffet, this mistake by necessity goes hand-in-hand with a poor-quality diet, specifically kibble, because it's the only type of food you can safely leave at room temperature 24/7. Free feeding is the perfect way to wind up with an overweight or obese pet. In addition, a constantly available food source turns your carnivorous hunter into a grazer, which goes against her nature.

Wild cats and dogs are always on the move in search of their next meal; they are fasting and exercising in between meals. Many domesticated pets, on the other hand, are free fed. Many pets and people graze all day, which results in chronically elevated blood sugar, a constant demand for insulin (increasing the likelihood of insulin resistance), the over consumption of calories and circadian rhythm disruption.

Research on animal models demonstrates time restricted feeding (TRF) translates into healthier, longer lived animals with fewer metabolic diseases.⁵ My suggestion is to aim for an 8-10 hour feeding window: feed your pet's meal(s) and all training treats within 10 hours (with a 14-hour fasting period) which allows ample time for the body's reparative and restorative processes to unfold, according to their inner biologic clocks.

We can't sleep and eat at the same time or heal and digest at the same time and constantly stressing our pet's bodies by going to bed on a full stomach translates into ongoing metabolic stress during the night. I recommend not feeding your pet within two hours of bedtime.

DO challenge your pet at mealtime — Separate your pet's daily food allocation into several small portions and place them in different locations around the house for her to find. Make use of food puzzle toys for dogs and indoor hunting feeders for cats, which encourage hunting behavior and provide mental stimulation.

Also consider putting food bowls at the bottom and top of as many flights of stairs as you have to encourage muscle-building and glucose-burning exercise throughout the day. While many people feed their pets twice a day, feeding just once a day actually offers a number of health benefits, including a lower risk of diabetes.

DON'T follow pet food package feeding guidelines — Most people who feed commercially available pet food follow the suggested feeding guidelines printed on the package, which often isn't the best approach. These recommendations typically use overly broad weight ranges such as "under 20 pounds" when clearly, a 15-pound dog requires significantly more calories than a 5-pound dog.

Package feeding instructions also use wide serving ranges, such as "feed ½ to 1½ cups." These suggestions obviously can't take into account, for example, an animal's activity level, and they tend to be short on other important details, such as whether "feed ½ to 1½ cups" is a daily or per-meal guideline.

DO feed your heavy pet to achieve weight loss — Decide (with the help of your veterinarian, if necessary) what your dog's or cat's ideal weight should be. Then use one of the following formulas to calculate the precise number of calories to feed daily to get your pet down to his ideal weight and maintain it.

For example, let's say your canine BFF is 30 pounds and his ideal weight is around 22 pounds: **Daily calories (canine) = Body weight (kg) x 30 + 70.**

First, convert his weight from pounds to kilograms. One kilogram = 2.2 pounds, so divide his ideal weight (not his current weight) in pounds by 2.2. $22/2.2$ means your dog's ideal weight in kilograms is 10. Now the formula looks like this: **Daily calories = 10 (kg) x 30 + 70.** And finally, it looks like this: **Daily calories = 370.**

If you feed your dog 370 calories a day, he should drop steadily to his ideal weight of 22 pounds and maintain it.

Let's say your cat's ideal weight is a slender 12 pounds rather than her current weight of 16 pounds: **Daily calories (feline) = Body Weight (kg) x 30 + 70 x 0.8.** (The formula for cats includes a slight adjustment to account for the extremely sedentary lifestyle of most kitties these days.)

Her ideal weight of 12 pounds divided by 2.2 converts to 5.5 kilograms; now the formula looks like this: **Daily calories = 5.5 (kg) x 30 + 70 x 0.8.** And finally, it looks like this: **Daily calories = 188.**

DON'T ignore your pet's need for exercise — You'll never see a fat dog or cat in the wild because they follow their natural instincts, which includes the drive to be physically active. And while your Yorkie doesn't behave or look much like her wolf cousins, she was designed to move like they do.

Given the opportunity and incentive, your little lap dog will walk impressive distances, hike, run, play, chase things, dig in the dirt, roll in the grass, enjoy every minute of it, and be healthier and happier for it. Only her humans, and possibly her too-heavy, uncomfortable body, are stopping her from being the little athlete she was born to be. How sad and unnecessary is that?

DO make sure your pet gets daily aerobic exercise — Consistent daily exercise, including at least 20 minutes (and preferably 60) of aerobic activity will help your pet burn fat and increase muscle tone. If you're unable to provide your dog with this much physical activity (and some dogs require even more), consider joining a pet sports club or doggy daycare. Another option is to hire a dog walker (or dog jogger, hiker or biker).

If your pet is very overweight or obese, she may not be able to endure extended periods of exercise initially. Swimming is an excellent low-impact, gentle form of exercise for dogs who need to start out slow, as well as those with arthritis or mobility issues.

Ask your veterinarian what exercises are safe for your pet to do, and which you either need to avoid or put off until she's in better condition.

DON'T overfeed treats — Treats — even very high-quality healthy ones — should make up less than 10% of your dog's or cat's daily food intake. It's also important to remember that treats aren't a complete form of nutrition and should never be used in place of nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate meals.

Overfeeding treats on top of daily food intake will result in an obese pet, and overfeeding treats while underfeeding balanced meals will result in nutritional deficiencies.

DO feed tiny healthy treats on a very limited basis — Limit treats to training and behavior rewards only. Again, keep treats at or fewer than 10% of your pet's daily food intake, which means offering very small pieces of healthy foods, very infrequently.

My favorite treats are berries, other safe fruits (e.g., melons, green bananas and apples), frozen peas, and raw sunflower and pumpkin seeds (pepitas). The ultimate snack for dieting dogs is bone broth ice cubes.

Sources and References

¹ [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention](#)

² [PetfoodIndustry.com, January 22, 2021](#)

^{3,4} [Pet Product News, Top Obesity-Related Pet Health Insurance Claims Revealed, January 18, 2021](#)

⁵ [Longo, V.D. et al. Fasting, circadian rhythms, and time restricted feeding in healthy lifespan. Cell Metab. 2016 Jun 14; 23\(6\): 1048–1059](#)
