

The Growing Canine Epidemic - Is Your Dog Affected?

Now affecting 59% of dogs and 61% of cats, this epidemic continues to spread – and that's reason for concern as it increases the risk for serious, chronic disease, including malignancy and premature death. The good news is, there are three actions you can take today to help turn things around.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- In 2022, 59% of dogs and 61% of cats were overweight or obese
- This is a 3% increase from 2018 — all represented by an increase in obesity
- The percentage of overweight dogs — 37% — stayed the same from 2018 to 2022, but the prevalence of obese dogs rose to 22%, up from 19% in 2018
- The numbers are cause for concern since, as in humans, excess weight increases the risk of chronic diseases — including kidney dysfunction, metabolic and endocrine disorders like diabetes, orthopedic diseases like osteoarthritis, and cancer
- To help your dog lose weight, swap out high-carb, highly processed kibble with a species-appropriate fresh food diet, watch portion sizes and ensure your dog gets daily activity

Pet obesity rates continue to increase in the U.S. The latest statistics, presented in the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention's (APOP) 2022 State of U.S. Pet Obesity Report,¹ found 59% of dogs and 61% of cats were overweight or obese.

This is a 3% increase from 2018 — all represented by an increase in obesity. The percentage of overweight dogs — 37% — stayed the same from 2018 to 2022, but the prevalence of obese dogs rose to 22%, up from 19% in 2018.²

The numbers are cause for concern since, as in humans, excess weight increases the risk of chronic diseases — including kidney dysfunction, metabolic and endocrine disorders like diabetes, orthopedic diseases like osteoarthritis, and cancer.³

Pets that are overweight or obese also have a lower life expectancy than their normal weight counterparts, so in order to give your pet the best chance for a long, healthy life, maintaining a healthy weight is crucial.

Many Pet Owners Don't See Their Pet's Weight Problem

It's common for pet owners to believe their pet's weight is fine when they're actually carrying extra pounds. The survey found 32% of pet owners with overweight or obese pets said their pet's weight was "normal," "ideal" or even thin. This included 36% of dog owners who said their pet's weight was normal when a veterinary professional classified it as overweight or obese.⁴

Among dogs with obesity, 9% of owners believed their weight was normal. When asked if their veterinarian discussed their pet's weight, 49% said they had. As for why more vets don't talk about pets' weight, the report noted, "Veterinarians often remark that pet owners will be embarrassed or even angry if told their pet has obesity or needs to lose weight."⁵

However, the survey revealed that only 17% of pet guardians said they felt uncomfortable or embarrassed when told their pet needed to lose weight. In contrast, 67% said they "have not felt embarrassment or uncomfortable after being told their pet needed to lose weight."⁶

It's interesting to note that most pet owners — 73% of dog guardians and 58% of cat guardians — reported having tried methods to help their pet shed excess weight. However, their results were less than stellar:

- Only 34% of dog owners and 19% of cat owners had "success" in helping their pet lose weight
- 26% of dog owners and 34% of cat owners reported "some success"
- 12% of dog owners and 5% of cat owners said their pet "gained back the weight"
- 23% of dog owners and 29% of cat owners said they had "no success" or "my pet did not lose weight despite my best effort"⁷

What's Causing so Many Pets To Be Overweight?

According to the APOP report, which evaluated 880 dogs and 272 cats:⁸

"The increase in pet dogs (dogs owned as opposed to feral or free-roaming) classified as overweight or with obesity may be attributed to improved clinical assessments, results of pandemic-related inactivity or overfeeding, aging dog populations, variations in sample size and distribution, or other unknown influences.

Because the relative changes were consistent, and the distribution of pet dogs with obesity increased, we have high confidence in these results."

However, when fresh pet food company NomNomNow evaluated the influence of a wide range of factors on overweight and obesity in dogs,⁹ eight factors stood out:

- Diet composition
- Age
- Probiotic supplementation
- Food motivation level
- Treat quantity
- Pet appetite
- Exercise
- Neutering

Diet was in the top four, with results showing that, compared to fresh fed dogs, those fed dry plus canned, dry only and dry plus fresh were more likely to be overweight or obese. Dogs fed raw food only were less likely to be overweight/obese.

How to Help Your Dog Lose Weight

To help your dog reach a fit weight, swap out high-carb, highly processed kibble with a species-appropriate fresher food diet that has been formulated for less active adults. I recommend you do a carb calculation on the food you're feeding and make sure it's less than 20% (and ideally less than 10%).

You can also use time restricted feeding (TRF), which means offering your pet's meals within an eight to 10-hour timeframe. This supports optimal health by keeping glucose and insulin low, while mimicking the way animals eat in nature.¹⁰

Portion size is also important, but don't follow the pet food label when doling out your pet's meals, because AAFCO doesn't require pet food companies to correlate feeding directions to the calories and nutrients in the food. Recently, consumer pet food advocate Susan Thixton, myself and Steve Brown met with the FDA to discuss our concerns surrounding nutritional adequacy label claims, including the "complete and balanced" nutrition claim.

This is an especially important issue when reducing the amount of food being fed (as in the case of pet parents trying to help their pets lose weight). You can catch Truth About Pet Food's excellent summary of these ongoing issues [here](#).

For now (until we can get American nutritional requirements and formulation guidelines updated), pet parents can work with a **fresh food recipe consultant** to create a raw or gently cooked homemade diet that is formulated for less active dogs energetically (calorically), but not nutritionally.

Otherwise, look for recipes formulated for adult dogs (versus "all life stages" formulations) and preferably "less active" formulas, meaning the formulator is using a lower metabolic factor when calculating nutrient requirements.

Movement Matters

Even if you have a large, fenced backyard, simply letting your dog out to roam isn't typically enough to provide the heart-pumping workout your dog needs (unless there's an excess amount of daily fence running or hole digging). In fact, dogs confined to a yard as their exercise regime were significantly more likely to be obese than dogs whose owners walked them regularly.¹¹

If your dog isn't used to walking or moving regularly, start slowly, and for very short sessions. Setting aside time every day to allow your dog to spend time on healthy soil, breath fresh air, and sniff and walk, nourishes their brains and their bodies. Daily movement is one of those non-negotiables for a healthier life, and your dog deserves the opportunity to put his joints through their natural range of motion at least once a day.

If your pup is too overweight to move comfortably, hates exercise or there are other physical factors preventing your dog from healthy daily movement (an injury, arthritis, etc.) rehabilitation (including underwater treadmill therapy) is the fastest way to better mobility and weight loss.

If you're not sure whether or not your dog's weight is ideal, consult with your veterinarian. For pets that are overweight, taking steps to help them slim down will greatly boost their longevity and long-term wellness. As noted by the APOP report:¹²

"Obesity is a physiological disorder affecting numerous body systems. Pet obesity often causes secondary, preventable diseases, including diabetes, osteoarthritis, and many forms of cancer. Veterinary professionals and the pet care industry need to educate the pet-owning public better that pet obesity is a disease with significant harmful impacts on both quality of life and life expectancy."

Sources and References

^{1, 12} [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention's \(APOP\) 2022 State of U.S. Pet Obesity Report](#)

^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8} [Pet Food Industry May 10, 2023](#)

⁹ [bioRxiv January 7, 2020](#)

¹⁰ [Cell Metab. 2016 Jun 14; 23\(6\): 1048-1059](#)

¹¹ [Preventive Veterinary Medicine December 1, 2009, Volume 92, Issue 4, Pages 333-340](#)
