

# The No. 1 Health Threat – Is Your Pet Affected?

One in 2 pets are, but many owners don't realize their pet has the disease. And, surprisingly, sometimes veterinarians don't even mention it if they know it. But being the greatest health threat, it kills millions prematurely, creates immense pain and suffering, and costs owners money.

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

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Results of the 2021 overweight/obese pet survey are in; researchers estimate that about 50% of dogs and cats in the U.S. are overweight (whether their owners acknowledge it or not)
- The survey also revealed that while both veterinarians and pet parents realize obesity in companion animals is a disease, most vets don't discuss the problem with their clients; of those who do, most have only misguided, uninformed advice to offer
- Obesity continues to be the greatest health threat to pets, in that it kills millions prematurely, creates immense pain and suffering, and costs tens of millions of dollars in avoidable veterinary expenses
- In 2023, parents of porky pets should throw out the carb-heavy processed diets, feed the right number of calories for weight loss, and kick-off a daily exercise routine

The 2021 survey results compiled by the **[Association for Pet Obesity Prevention](#)** (APOP) are in. A total of 865 pet parents and veterinary professionals from 47 U.S. states and D.C. completed the online survey from October 12 to December 31, 2021.<sup>1</sup> The age breakout of respondents was as follows:

- Generation Z (< 25 years of age) — 18%
- Millennials (25 to 40) — 32%
- Generation X (41 to 56) — 21%
- Baby Boomers (57 to 75) — 25%
- Silent Generation (> 75) — 3%

## Survey Says: Fat Pets and Fat-Blind Pet Parents Persist

As in previous years, the news isn't good. Researchers estimate that about 50% of U.S. dogs and cats are overweight or obese. This isn't surprising, given that too-heavy pets have become a trend of late. And sadly, fat blindness among pet parents is also pervasive, with only 39% of dog owners and 45% of cat owners admitting the truth about overweight furry family members.

These percentages show that veterinarians and pet parents don't see eye-to-eye when it comes to companion animal weight issues. In addition, only 46% of owners report that their vet discusses their pet's ideal or healthy weight at least yearly. Further, 22% of pet owners say their veterinarians talk about weight only if asked specifically about it, and another 12% simply don't discuss the subject with their vets.

Interestingly, most pet owners (72%) consider pet obesity to be a disease, as do 87% of veterinarians.

## How to Tell if Your Dog or Cat Is Overweight

Because so many pets are overweight today, many people can no longer tell the difference between a fat pet and a normal-sized pet.

If you're not sure about your own dog or cat, look down at him. Does he have a tapered in waist? If not — if he's shaped more like an oval, he's probably too heavy. You should also be able to feel (but not see) his ribs as well as the bones near the base of his tail (the exception to this rule are sighthounds, e.g., Greyhounds, Whippets). If he's obese, you'll see obvious amounts of excess fat on his abdomen, hips, and neck.

Also compare your pet to these body condition charts provided by the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA):



**WSAVA**  
Global Nutrition  
Committee

## Body Condition Score



### 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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# Body Condition Score



## UNDER IDEAL

- 1 Ribs very easily seen on short-haired cats. No fat pads present. Severe abdominal tuck. Lumbar vertebrae and pelvic bones easily seen and felt.
- 2 Ribs easily seen on short-haired cats. Lumbar vertebrae obvious. Pronounced abdominal tuck. No fat pads present.
- 3 Ribs easily felt with minimal fat covering. Lumbar vertebrae obvious. Obvious waist behind ribs. Minimal abdominal fat pads.
- 4 Ribs felt with minimal fat covering. Noticeable waist behind ribs. Slight abdominal tuck. Minimal abdominal fat pads.

## IDEAL

- 5 Well-proportioned. Ribs felt with slight fat covering. Waist seen behind ribs, but not pronounced. Abdominal fat pad minimal.

## OVER IDEAL

- 6 Ribs felt with slight excess fat covering. Waist and abdominal fat pad present but not obvious. Abdominal tuck absent.\*
- 7 Ribs not easily felt through moderate fat covering. Waist not easily seen. Slight rounding of abdomen may be present. Moderate abdominal fat pad.
- 8 Ribs not felt due to excess fat covering. Waist absent. Obvious rounding of abdomen with prominent abdominal fat pad. Fat deposits present over lower back area.
- 9 Ribs not felt under heavy fat cover. Heavy fat deposits over lumbar area, face and limbs. Distention of abdomen with no waist. Large abdominal fat deposits.

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**Cat Body Condition Score**

The goal for both dogs and cats is a body condition score of 5. Unfortunately, many owners assume their pet's body score is just fine because their veterinarian never mentions their pet has a weight issue during exams. Veterinarians fail to address extra pounds for many reasons, including because it can be an uncomfortable conversation.

I've had countless pet parents tell me I was the first vet to comment that their dog or cat needed to lose a few pounds, which tells me vets are not adequately addressing the slow but consistent weight gain that occurs over time with many pets and contributes to so many degenerative diseases that could be avoided with appropriate weight management.

## Most Veterinarians Aren't Good Animal Nutrition Resources

There are many destructive forces at work that help create and maintain fat dogs and cats. There are owners who either don't realize their pet is too heavy or aren't concerned enough to do something about it. And then we have around half the veterinarians in the country not even raising the subject with owners of overweight animals. Of those who do, the vast majority stick stubbornly to their misguided, uninformed advice to feed highly processed, starch-based diets.

If you're frustrated by your own veterinarian's lack of guidance, or poor guidance when it comes to your pet's diet, you should know that most veterinary schools gloss over the entire subject of nutrition. Some vet schools don't even have a nutritionist on faculty, they leave it up to a handful of major pet food companies to conduct seminars for vet students that are heavily slanted toward the ultraprocessed products they sell.

Sadly, after graduation, too few veterinarians attempt to fill in the significant gaps in their animal nutrition education, and those who do often decide to become board-certified veterinary nutritionists, which for most means winding up with financial ties to major pet food manufacturers.

Board-certified veterinary nutritionists are DVMs who complete additional training and receive a diploma from the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN). Once certified, veterinary nutritionists work in veterinary schools, government agencies, pet drug companies, private animal hospitals, for themselves, and very often, for pet food companies.

Major pet food manufacturers also frequently pay the tuition for DVMs studying to become veterinary nutritionists. So, when a veterinary nutritionist recommends X or Y or Z pet food or discourages the feeding of fresh foods or homemade diets, chances are he or she is obligated in some way to a pet food manufacturer.

These associations create obvious conflicts of interest when it comes to the advice and recommendations many vets offer, which means that for the time being, fewer and fewer pet parents look to their vets for helpful nutrition advice.

## **Obesity Is the Greatest Health Threat to Pets**

Overweight and obesity in pets is both a primary disease and the root cause of many other diseases that develop as the result of too much weight, including:

- Arthritis
- Diabetes
- Hypertension
- Hypothyroidism
- Kidney disease

And you can add to this list a significant reduction in the quantity and quality of your overweight pet's life. While some pet parents aren't even aware their dog or cat is overweight, others know but aren't concerned or don't seem to realize they're compromising the animal's health.

I wish more pet owners understood the consequences of letting their dog or cat get fat. I find it hard to believe most pet parents would continue to overfeed, feed the wrong foods, and under-exercise their companion animals if they realized they were destroying their pet's health.

## **Dos and Don'ts for Keeping Your Pet at a Healthy Weight**

The following are several of the recommendations I offer pet parents on the best way to prevent weight gain and help pets lose weight if necessary.

1. **DON'T feed a starch-heavy, carbohydrate-laden, ultraprocessed 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 kibble, 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 heavy in 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.

Calculate the carbs in your pet's dry diet by adding up the moisture, fat, protein, fiber, and ash (estimate 6% if you don't see it listed) on the pet food label and subtract this value from 100: this is the amount of soluble carbs in your pet's diet (aka sugar).

**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, nutritionally complete 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 despite a lower calorie intake.

This energy expenditure to nutrient intake mismatch is a problem the FDA and AAFCO have yet to address. As it stands, if you feed less than the amount listed on the pet food package for your animal's body weight you risk possible nutrient deficiencies. Ideally, the FDA will establish a less active and inactive nutritional profile for pets, but until this happens, it's important you know enough as a guardian to not let this happen.

The key to healthy weight loss is to meet your pet's nutritional requirements through a balanced diet but feed fewer calories and encourage 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, tapioca or any other vegan filler 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 essential 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 body.

If you can't prepare your pet's meals, partner with a transparent company happy to discuss ingredient sourcing and quality control with you. You can also find lots of folks that will work with you to create a customized homemade fresh food diet for your pet at [www.freshfoodconsultants.org](http://www.freshfoodconsultants.org).

2. **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.

A growing body of research on animal models demonstrates time restricted feeding (TRF) translates into healthier, longer-lived animals with fewer metabolic diseases.<sup>2</sup> I have found this to be the cheapest and easiest way to create health, especially if you can't feed an ideal, fresh food diet or maintain an ideal exercise schedule for your animals.

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 your staircase if you have one 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.

3. **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 more calories than a 5-pound dog.

Package feeding instructions also use wide serving ranges, such as "feed 1/2 to 1 1/2 cups." These suggestions obviously don't consider, for example, an animal's activity level, and they tend to be short on other important details, such as whether "feed 1/2 to 1 1/2 cups" is a daily or per-meal guideline.

Contact the company and ask what's the least amount of food that can be fed for your animal's bodyweight without resulting in nutritional deficiencies, then divide that amount into several meals within an eight-hour "eating window," which research also shows helps burn more body fat.

**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**.

4. **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 Chihuahua 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. If you're dealing with a fat feline, check out 10 ways to help your cat exercise.

5. **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 fruits that can be cubed into tiny, bite-sized morsels (e.g., melons, green bananas, and apples), frozen peas and blueberries, and raw sunflower and pumpkin seeds (pepitas).

The ultimate snack for dieting dogs is bone broth ice cubes. For ideas on preparing homemade treats for your furry companion, download my free e-book *Homemade Treats for Healthy Pets*, where you'll find lots of nutritious and simple recipes for both cats and dogs.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [PetfoodIndustry.com](#), November 4, 2022

<sup>2</sup> [Longo, V.D. et al. Fasting, circadian rhythms, and time restricted feeding in healthy lifespan. Cell Metab. 2016 Jun 14; 23\(6\): 1048-1059](#)

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