

The Blueprint for a Healthier Pet

An eye-opening look into the silent epidemic striking at the heart of pet health, driven by common yet overlooked lifestyle choices.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The overweight/obesity epidemic in U.S. dogs and cats is resulting in a rising rate of lifestyle-related diabetes diagnoses as well
- The No. 1 cause of death in diabetic pets is not the disease, but euthanasia, because many pet parents find they simply can't cope with the demands of the disease
- Most pets develop diabetes when they're middle-aged or older; causes include obesity, high carb diets, a sedentary lifestyle, and over-vaccination
- It's important to help prevent diabetes in your pet by offering a healthy lifestyle; once a dog or cat has the disease, it can become extremely difficult and expensive to manage

Given the **obesity epidemic in dogs and cats**, it's not surprising that an estimated 1 in 300 pets develops diabetes.¹ The severity of the disease ranges from an incidental finding during a routine veterinary visit, to pets who are in critical condition.

"Depending on how [the patient] comes in is very much going to depend on how you need to manage them, what kind of care they need, and how that discussion goes with long-term management," explained veterinary technician Liza Wysong during a lecture at a recent veterinary conference.

*"For owners, this is hard. I'm sure tons of you have had [clients] say, 'I didn't even know pets can get diabetes.' They [go] from not knowing that pets could get diabetes to 'I have to manage this lifelong condition.' It's big, it's scary, and a lot to absorb. We must understand what's going on, so that we can guide them because they're going to need a lot of support."*²

Tragically, the number one cause of death in diabetic dogs and cats is not the disease itself, but euthanasia, because many pet owners find they simply can't cope with the demands of the disease.³

Most Diabetes in Pets Is Lifestyle-Related

Diabetes almost always occurs in middle aged or older animals. In dogs, the common age of diagnosis 7 to 9 years old with female dogs 3 times more likely to acquire the disease than males. Cats are commonly diagnosed at 10 to 13 years, with male cats twice as likely as females.⁴ By this age, many pets have encountered enough lifestyle obstacles to induce either decreased production of insulin or a diminished ability to use it efficiently.

Diabetes in cats typically occurs from inefficient use of insulin, but in dogs, it's most often a problem with insulin production. That's why even though dogs develop the disease later in life like cats and humans with Type II diabetes, the disease almost always takes the form of Type I diabetes in canines.

Insulin is a naturally occurring hormone that moves sugar, amino acids, electrolytes, and fatty acids into the cells of the body. A lack of insulin will cause these vital substances to remain outside the cells, starving them.

If there's enough insulin being produced in your pet's body, but the cells can't use the nutrients they receive properly, the result is the same — cells starved for nutrients.

3 Primary Causes of Diabetes in Pets

1. **Obesity and high carbohydrate diets** — Obesity is by far the biggest reason pets develop diabetes. The majority of dogs and cats in the U.S. consume a high calorie, high carbohydrate diet, even though neither species has a physiological requirement for grains like corn, wheat, rice, soy, millet or quinoa as sources of energy.

Grain-free kibble has made feeding pets even more confusing and also contributes to the obesity and diabetic epidemics we're experiencing. These diets are calorie dense and contain high glycemic potatoes, chickpeas, peas, or tapioca, which require a substantial insulin release from the body.

All the carbs (starch) in your pet's food — which can be as much as 80% of the contents — break down into sugar. Excess sugar can result in diabetes.

2. **Sedentary lifestyle** — Another lifestyle-related reason pets develop diabetes, one that often goes hand-in-hand with poor nutrition, is lack of exercise. Furry family members often lead the same sedentary lifestyle their humans do. It's not a total lack of movement, it's just not nearly enough of the kind that's beneficial for health.
3. **Over-vaccination** — There is a growing body of research that connects autoimmune disorders to diabetes, especially in dogs. If your pet's immune system attacks his pancreas, he can develop diabetes. Dogs, in particular, are prone to immune system attacks on the pancreas, or more specifically, the cells that secrete insulin in the pancreas. This situation points to an autoimmune component in the development of diabetes in canines.

Immune-mediated or autoimmune diseases are caused by overstimulation of the immune system. One of the primary ways your pet's immune system can be overstimulated is through **repetitive yearly vaccinations** against diseases he's already immunized against.

How to Help Prevent Lifestyle-Related Diabetes in Your Pet

- Help your furry family member stay trim by feeding a portion-controlled, moisture rich, balanced, species-specific diet consisting of a variety of unadulterated protein sources, healthy fats, low starch veggies and fruit in moderation, and specific nutritional supplements as necessary.
- Your pet needs regular heart-thumping, muscle-toning, calorie burning exercise. If your dog or cat is lying around the house all day while you're at work, her heart rate is not being elevated often or consistently enough to burn calories and achieve good cardiovascular conditioning.

Allow a minimum of 20 minutes of daily aerobic exercise for your pet. One way to help accomplish this with cats is by replacing food bowls with indoor hunting feeders that encourage kitties to get active and are also an excellent way to control the amount of calories being consumed.

- As mentioned earlier, autoimmune diseases can be the result of overstimulation of the immune system. One of the primary ways your pet's immune system is overstimulated is through repetitive yearly vaccinations for diseases he is already immunized against.

If your pet had his full set of puppy or kitten shots on schedule, there's a high likelihood his immunity to those diseases will last a lifetime. Each time a fully immunized pet receives a repetitive set of vaccines, it increases the risk of overstimulating his immune system.

Find an integrative veterinarian who runs antibody titer tests to measure each animal's antibody response from previous vaccinations. Titer results will tell you whether re-vaccination is necessary.

Prevention Is Always the Best 'Cure'

Treatment of diabetes in a family pet is complex and time consuming in the vast majority of cases. It involves regular monitoring of blood glucose levels, ongoing dietary adjustments, insulin given by injection or oral glucose-regulating drugs, and keeping a constant, careful eye on your sick pet.

Frequent veterinary visits are a way of life, and the cost of checkups, tests, medical procedures, and insulin therapy add up fast. Sadly, this is why euthanasia is the number one cause of death in dogs and cats with the disease.

Needless to say, the toll it takes on your pet's health and quality of life can also be devastating. That's why you must take steps to remove any obstacles in the way of a lifetime of good health for your four-legged family member.

Also consider asking your veterinarian to run a test called **A1CARE** as part of your pet's routine wellness exam. This test can detect clinical and subclinical/transitional diabetes, as well as give an overall picture of your dog's or cat's metabolic health.

Sources and References

¹ [Merck Veterinary Manual, Diabetes Mellitus in Dogs and Cats](#)

² [dvm360, October 18, 2023](#)

³ [dvm360, November 8, 2018](#)

⁴ [Countryside Veterinary Clinic \(Archived\)](#)
