

Pet Obesity: The 'Early Death Trap' Millions of Pet Owners Blissfully Ignore

Besides the very real risk of predisposing your pet to an early and painful demise, it is costing you plenty — for medical care as well as the emotional price tag of watching your precious pet suffer. And it's so easily preventable. Are you 'blind' to this pet health trap?

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Over half of U.S. dogs and nearly 60% of U.S. cats are overweight or obese
- The two most common reasons for pet obesity are overfeeding and lack of physical activity
- Other risk factors include a pet's breed, gender, age, daily calories consumed (food and treats), and pet guardians who don't recognize a fat pet when they see one

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Fat pets are a growing (pun intended) epidemic in the U.S. and in other countries as well.

According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP), in 2014, an estimated 53% of dogs and 58% of cats in the U.S. were overweight or obese.¹

"Pudgy pooches and fat cats are now the norm," says Dr. Ernie Ward, founder and president of APOP. "This is the first generation of pets that will not live as long as their parents. Even worse, the majority of today's overweight pets will endure painful and expensive medical conditions — all of which can be avoided.

This epidemic is needlessly costing pet owners tens of millions of dollars in unnecessary medical bills, not to mention the crippling arthritis, challenges of diabetes, and increased risk of cancer these pets endure," says Ward. "We're loving our pets to an early — and painful — death."

Most dogs and cats become too heavy because they are overfed and under-exercised. However, there are other predictors of obesity that many pet guardians may not be aware of.

Six Risk Factors for Obesity

1. **Breed** — Any cat or dog can become overweight, however, certain breeds of dogs are more apt to be overweight than others. These include Cocker Spaniels, Dachshunds, Dalmatians, Golden Retrievers, Rottweilers, Shetland Sheepdogs, certain mixed breeds, and most definitely, the Labrador Retriever.

Labs are the most popular breed in the U.S., and they are also the most likely to be overweight. Labs are big

eaters, and coupled with a need for fewer calories than many people realize, these dogs tend to bulk up quickly.

2. **Gender** — Neutered dogs of both sexes are twice as likely to be overweight as intact dogs. Male cats are genetically predisposed to become heavy, and the risk increases if your male kitty is neutered.
3. **Age** — The risk of overweight increases as your dog or cat gets older. Just as in people, the dreaded "midlife spread" is common in pets. If you're still feeding your 3-year-old dog the same amount you fed him two years ago, you may very well be overfeeding.

Another age-related risk factor has to do with your own age. Seniors and the elderly tend to overfeed and/or over-treat their pets.

4. **Feeding guidelines on pet food packages** — It's unsure how most pet food manufacturers arrive at their "how much to feed" guidelines, but typically if you follow their instructions, you'll wind up with a fat dog or cat.

Instead, ask your integrative veterinarian how many calories your pet should consume each day based on her breed, age, activity level, and current body condition. Use the following calculators:

$$\text{Daily calories (canine)} = \text{Body Weight (kg)} \times 30 + 70$$

In order to use this calculation, first we have to convert the weight from pounds to kilograms. Let's say your dog weighs 50 pounds and it's a good weight for her.

One kilogram = 2.2 pounds, so divide her weight in pounds by 2.2: $50/2.2 = 22.7$, so your dog's weight in kilograms is 22.7. Referring back to the formula:

$$\text{Daily calories (canine)} = 22.7 \times 30 + 70$$

And finally:

$$\text{Daily calories (your dog)} = 751$$

The formula for kitties has a slight variation to account for the ultra-sedentary lifestyle of most housecats:

$$\text{Daily calories (feline)} = \text{Body Weight (kg)} \times 30 + 70 \times 0.8$$

Let's say your cat is a little heavy at 15 pounds and she should be at 12 pounds. We want to calculate her daily calories based on her desired weight — not her current weight.

$$\begin{aligned} 12 \text{ pounds divided by } 2.2 &= 5.45 \text{ kilograms} \\ 5.45 \text{ kilograms} \times 30 &= 164; 164 + 70 = 234; 234 \times 0.8 = 187 \end{aligned}$$

5. **Overdoing treats** — Dog and cat treats — even very healthy ones — should not constitute more than 15% of your pet's daily calorie intake, and preferably less than 10%. Feeding treats on top of daily food intake will result in an overweight pet, and treats should never be a substitute for balanced, species-appropriate food.

A good rule of thumb for treat size is "the smaller the better." Get in the habit of feeding tiny treats, and feed them infrequently.

6. **'Fat blindness'** — Because so many dogs and cats (and people) are overweight these days, many pet owners have gone "fat blind." They don't recognize an overweight pet as being too heavy or out of shape. In fact, clients with slim, trim, and well-conditioned dogs regularly hear from fat blind pet owners that they are starving their pets!

It's important to do your own research and take the advice of veterinary experts as to the body condition of your pet. Chances are, your acquaintances at the dog park or pet owner neighbors are fat blind, and heeding their advice can keep or make your pet overweight.

Reality Check: Is My Pet Fat?

As a general rule, your pet is at a healthy weight if the following factors apply:

- Ribs and spine are easily felt
- There is a waist when viewed from above
- Abdomen is raised and not sagging when viewed from the side

Your dog or cat is overweight or obese if:

- You cannot feel the ribs or spine beneath fat deposits; fat deposits extend to the chest, tail base, and hindquarters
- The waist is distended or pear shaped when viewed from above
- The abdomen sags when viewed from the side
- The chest and abdomen appear distended or swollen

If you're not sure whether your pet is overweight, you should consult your veterinarian. Together, you can determine what your dog's or cat's ideal weight should be, and the best way to help your pet achieve and maintain a healthy size.

Sources and References

[Spot Speaks October 4, 2015](#)

¹ [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention](#)