

## Is Your Pet's Weight Putting Their Health at Risk?

More than half of dogs and cats are struggling with extra pounds, but many pet parents are oblivious to their distress. Here's what you need to do to help keep your pet's weight on the right track.

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Over half of U.S. pets are overweight (61% of cats and 59% of dogs), yet most owners are unaware — 84% of dog owners and 70% of cat owners believe their pets are healthy
- Signs of pet obesity include inability to feel ribs easily, lack of visible hourglass figure from above and a low-hanging abdomen that drags near the ground
- Obesity can reduce your pets' lifespan by two years and increase their risks of diabetes, arthritis, cancer, respiratory issues, and complications during surgery or anesthesia
- A species-appropriate diet high in animal protein and low in starches, combined with portion control and a 14- to 16-hour daily fasting window, will help maintain your pet's healthy weight
- Regular exercise (20 to 60 minutes daily), limited treats, enrichment activities and regular vet checkups are essential for preventing and reversing pet obesity

If your dog or cat appears pudgy, their stomach sags to the ground and they're moving much slower, it means they're carrying extra pounds.

You might think it's adorable, but just like in humans, excess weight in pets should never be taken lightly, as it can significantly increase their risk of health problems, impair their quality of life and cut short their precious time with you.

### More Than Half of Dogs and Cats Are Now Obese

In 2023, the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP) reported startling statistics — 61% of cats and 59% of dogs in the U.S. are now classified as overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> But what's even more alarming is that pet parents are largely unaware and oblivious to their pet's condition.<sup>2</sup>

The APOP conducted a survey on pet owners and vet professionals regarding the state of their pet's health. A whopping 84% of dog owners and 70% of cat owners believed that their pet's body condition was healthy; only 28% of cat owners and 17% of dog owners admitted that their pet was overweight or obese.

Clearly, there's a significant lack of awareness among pet owners regarding their own pet's state of health. This is particularly problematic, as obesity in pets can only be resolved if the pet parent acknowledges there is a problem, and crucial measures would need to be taken to bring their pet back to a healthy, optimal weight.

## Signs That Your Pet Is Packing on Extra Pounds

According to the Boundary Bay Veterinary Specialty Hospital,<sup>3</sup> there's a tool called Body Condition Scoring used by veterinary professionals to identify a pet's body fat level and determine their proper body condition. Think of this as the pet version of the body mass index (BMI) measurement in humans.

"BCS helps determine if a pet's growth rate and feeding amounts are correct. Monitoring growth and weight can help prevent obesity," the Boundary Bay website states.<sup>4</sup>

To determine BCS, your vet will weigh your pet during every visit. They will also conduct a visual examination of your pet from head to tail, checking their ribs and belly. This assessment will help your vet come up with recommendations on how to adjust the amount of food you are feeding your pet to meet their ideal BCS.

But even before you go to the vet to have your pet properly assessed, you may be noticing some obvious symptoms that your pet is overweight. According to Going Mutts Pet Services:<sup>5</sup>

*"First things first, you should be able to feel - and count - your dog or cat's ribs easily when you slightly run your fingers across their side. Second, when you look down at your pet from above you should be able to see an hourglass figure. If your pet looks like a blimp from above, they're probably overweight.*

*Lastly, if you look at your pet from the side, you should see a slight tuck or upward slope of the tummy. If their abdomen hangs low and drags near the ground, your pet is overweight or obese."*

## Obesity Is Linked to Numerous Health Problems

Just like in humans, being overweight or obese in pets is considered a primary disease and a risk factor of other health conditions. It affects their longevity, reducing their lifespan by two years (or more).<sup>6</sup>

According to Ernie Ward, DVM, CVFT, the founder and president of the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention:<sup>7</sup>

*"There is growing evidence that obesity in dogs and cats increases the risk of many non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including skin and respiratory disorders, and renal dysfunction. It increases the risk of metabolic and endocrine disorders (e.g., diabetes), orthopedic diseases (e.g., osteoarthritis, cranial cruciate ligament disease), some types of cancer, and decreased life expectancy.*

*Pet obesity results in reduced quality of life, significant pain and suffering, and increased economic costs for owners, accounting for an estimated twenty percent of all pet insurance claims."*

Obese pets are also less active than healthy-weight pets. And when they do engage in rigorous exercise, they have a higher risk of injuries, such as torn knee ligaments. They also become easily tired and fatigued.

Packing on extra pounds also affects their response to certain procedures, which are usually safe or non-threatening to normal-weight pets. For example, overweight or obese pets have a higher risk of suffering from complications of anesthesia and surgery, because they have reduced lung function, poor liver and kidney function. Their risk of getting wound infection is also higher, and they often require more anesthetic than healthy weight pets.

Undergoing surgery could also be risky, as the surgeon could be challenged due to excessive body cavity fat stores. Obese pets' internal structures could be embedded too deeply in these fatty accumulations.<sup>8</sup>

## Top Ways to Address Pet Obesity

There are many factors that can lead to obesity in pets, such as their diet, physical activities (or lack thereof), medical conditions, and whether they have been spayed or not. However, the most crucial factor that can affect their chances of being obese or overweight is you – as pet parents, you make the decisions about their diet and lifestyle.

By being well-informed of the risk factors and strategies to prevent or address/reverse pet obesity, you can help your pet lose or avoid the extra pounds and prolong their lives. Here are some ways to keep your pet from falling into this trap:

- **Feed a fresh food diet** — Cats and dogs thrive on a species-appropriate and nutritionally balanced diet that's high in animal protein and moisture, and low in grains and starches. If your pet is already porky, switching to a high-quality fresh food diet is the way to go.

The best choice is a nutritionally optimal homemade fresh food diet, made with lean meats, healthy fats, and 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.

To help them lose weight in a healthy manner, you must meet their nutritional needs while doing portion control. Doing this while encouraging more exercise can help force his body to burn more fat stores.

- **Eliminate all starch-heavy, high-carbohydrate, ultraprocessed foods from their diet** — Aside from overfeeding, the poor quality of ultraprocessed foods is a significant contributor to the high rates of obesity among pets today. For example, many dry pet foods are carb-heavy, with carbohydrates comprising around 40% to 50% of the total content, leading to metabolic problems, insulin resistance, diabetes and other health issues.
- **Avoid free feeding** — This means providing access to food 24/7, which is against their nature as a hunter. Wild cats and dogs are always on the move in search of their next meal; they are fasting and exercising in between meals. However, domesticated pets are always grazing on kibble and treats, leading to overconsumption of calories.

Instead, aim for an eight- to 10-hour feeding window, while allowing for a 16- to 14-hour fasting period. This allows ample time for their body's reparative and restorative processes to unfold, according to their inner biologic clocks.

- **Provide opportunities for exercise** — In fact, make exercise a part of their everyday routine. At least 20 minutes (or preferably 60) of consistent daily exercise, ideally aerobic activity, helps your pet burn fat and increase muscle tone. Playtime, going on daily walks, or hiking are some ideas.

If your pet is very overweight or obese, extended periods of exercise can be difficult for them, so choose low-impact, gentle exercise for them. For dogs, swimming is an excellent choice, especially if they have arthritis or mobility issues. Consult with your veterinarian on the best exercises that are safe for your pet.

- **Limit treats** — Give them only as training or behavior rewards. In addition, avoid ultraprocessed snacks and treats, and opt for healthy choices like blueberries, bite-sized apples and bananas, raw pumpkin seeds and

bone broth cubes.

- **Provide enrichment activities and mental stimulation** — A bored pet is a hungry pet. Give them interactive toys, puzzled feeders and other activities that will help enrich their mind and keep them mentally engaged. It will help keep them away from the food bowl, too.
- **Schedule regular vet checkups** — Your integrative veterinarian will work with you to come up with a plan to help your pet lose weight, and will guide you in tracking their progress. They can also inform you if your pet is at risk of any illness and what you can do to keep it from progressing.

## Don't Give Up on Your Obese Pet

Obesity is completely reversible, and with the right strategies you can help your pet get back to a healthy weight. Remember, however, that preventing obesity is much better than reversing it, so practicing these tips even at an early age can be ultimately helpful in avoiding this condition.

### Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [World Pet Obesity Association, 2022 U.S. State of Pet Obesity Report](#)

<sup>2</sup> [2023 Pet Weight Management and Nutritional Survey](#)

<sup>3,4,6,8</sup> [Boundary Bay Veterinary Specialty Hospital, October 9, 2024](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Going Mutts, October 8, 2024](#)

<sup>7</sup> [State of U.S. Pet Obesity, 2022](#)

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