

It wasn't long ago that I wrote a column about weight control in pets. I spoke of the emerging concerns of chronic obesity and health issues such as arthritis, pulmonary problems, orthopedic issues, and increased surgical and anesthetic risks, to name a few. I've decided to write about this concern again. The growing body of evidence in both human and animal medicine linking chronic obesity with increased incidence of illness demands a stronger effort on our part to control weight gain in our animal family members. As a caretaker of an animal we need to make decisions for them that they can't make for themselves. Never is this more obvious and simple than in the amount of food they are fed each day.

Today scientists look at fat tissue in a completely different way than 15-20 years ago. Long thought of as simply an energy storage tissue that seconds as a thermal insulator, fat tissue is now believed to be a broad reaching endocrine organ; releasing substances into the body that can augment inflammation and cause other maladies. From a medical perspective, this is a real force to be reckoned with. We all need to consider weight control in our pets as vital to their well-being; just as we would consider appropriate diet, exercise, shelter, vaccinations and other health care as important for them. If we think of all the things our pets give us like unconditional love, a reason to smile and laugh, an appreciation for "you" just being "you", a reminder of what's really important in life; I think giving them a healthier, happier, longer life is more than a fair trade off.

Research shows that pet owners may have some difficulty recognizing obesity in their pet. Ultimately your veterinarian should make the final call, but here are some guidelines (for dogs and cats) that may get you thinking about whether your pet is overweight or not.

- 1) If your dog is a breed prone to obesity such as a Retriever, Beagle, Basset Hound, Cocker Spaniel, Dachshund, Sheltie, or a terrier...he/she might be obese.
- 2) If you have a multi-dog household. Your dog is more likely to eat more and faster compared to one-dog households...and might be obese.
- 3) If your pet is over 5 years old and still eating the same type of food he/she was eating at a younger age... he/she might be obese.
- 4) If when feeling your pet's ribs-you can't feel your pet's ribs...he/she might be obese.
- 5) If when standing over your pet looking down at his/her torso, it looks less like an hourglass and more like a rectangle...your pet might be obese.
- 6) If you feed pet dog table scraps and/or frequent non-meal treats...he/she might be obese.
- 7) If you don't measure the amount of food you feed, but just pour/scoop some into the food bowl at mealtime...your pet might be obese.
- 8) If your pet is slow to stand up and/or is less active than you remember... he/she might be obese.
- 9) If your dog gets less than 20-30 minutes of outside exercise/play time per day...he/she might be obese.

Treating obesity, and thus helping prevent the myriad diseases suspected to be associated with it, is simple in concept: The pet needs to eat fewer calories than it expends each day. While simple in theory, this health enabling, energy giving, disease preventing program can be a bit challenging to most pet lovers. Your veterinarian can help with this important undertaking and in fact should be integral to the process. Before undertaking a weight loss program, your veterinarian will want to examine your pet and possibly run some simple tests to be sure there are no underlying health issues that can complicate weight loss efforts. Feeding an appropriate number of calories coupled with daily exercise forms the basis for any weight control recommendation. Recently a promising new medication made by Pfizer Animal Health called Slentrol® has become available to help with managing a dog's weight (sorry, not available for cats). This prescription medication has a novel mode of action, unlike any human weight control medication. Talk to your veterinarian to see if this medication may be appropriate for your dog.

It's not often in medicine that we get a chance to treat or prevent disease with little or no risk of adverse effect. The prevention of obesity related illness is one of those opportunities. Your pet is counting on you for good health.

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