

It never ceases to amaze me how one of the cheapest, simplest and theoretically easiest things we can do to keep our pets healthy is so rarely practiced. For years I have cajoled, coaxed, lobbied, arm-twisted and I admit it, even guilted people into understanding how important it is to keep their pets trim.

In this column I'll cover some of the causes-some obvious, some not so obvious-of weight gain in pets and how extra body fat can adversely affect their well being. I'll also discuss how one can begin a weight control program for their pet.

Obesity, as defined by the Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, is "a condition characterized by excessive body fat". Sounds simple enough, until we realize everyone has a different definition for "excessive". Pet owners often ask me "What is an ideal weight for my pet?" I try to stay away from actual numbers of pounds for individual animals; rather I like to recommend the "Rib Test". This test involves simply feeling for your pet's rib bones along the side of his chest wall. Start by placing your hand just behind his armpit or shoulder area and move backward as you feel for his ribs. If you can *easily* feel the rib bones as you move your hand backward then your dog/cat is likely to be at a good body weight. If, on the other hand, you have to press in fairly hard to feel the ribs then your pet is likely carrying a few extra pounds. Of course if you can ever *see* rib lines then your pet is too thin. This test seems to work regardless of the age or breed of dog or cat.

Fat tissue is remarkably efficient at storing energy. When the number of calories taken in (food) exceeds the calories expended with activities those extra calories are "stored" in the body as fat. Overeating is easily the most common cause of obesity in pets. Let's face it, if your cat is anything like my cat, he doesn't burn too many calories in his daily trip from the couch to the food bowl and back again. Therefore he shouldn't need many calories per day in his diet to maintain good health and body weight.

Of course there are some medical reasons for excessive weight gain. Spaying or neutering your dog will increase the likelihood of weight gain (but don't let this be a reason to not spay or neuter your dog/cat because any potential weight gain in an altered pet is quite preventable). Certain endocrine problems, such as low thyroid gland function, and excessive adrenal gland function can also result in unexpected weight gain.

Some may argue that a little extra weight is not a health risk for pets, but the facts just don't support that position. There are many well-recognized health problems that are either more common or more severe in even mildly overweight pets. Take for instance arthritis. Joint pain can affect any dog or cat, but in the overweight pet the arthritis will often be aggravated (and therefore more painful) by the extra pounds the joints have to support. In addition, the heavy animal will tend to be less active and have poorer overall muscle tone, which is important for healthy joint function. Obese pets have higher risks for diseases of the pancreas (including diabetes), liver, lungs, and gastrointestinal tract. High blood pressure increased anesthetic and surgical risk, and possible reduced resistance to infection are additional concerns with overweight pets. Research in the past two decades suggests a link between obesity and inflammation, with growing consensus that chronic inflammation in the body has broad reaching adverse affects.

If you've done the "Rib Test" on your pet and you think he/she is a bit heavy don't panic. Your veterinarian can advise you on how to take off some of the extra weight. Usually a complete physical exam is recommended with blood and urine tests to rule out underlying problems that may be contributing to the weight problem. If all the tests are normal, a safe weight control plan can be developed. The cornerstone of your pet's weight loss program will be reduced calorie intake with increased calorie utilization-or the "eat less, exercise more" rule. Your veterinarian can recommend some excellent low fat/low calorie diet options that can make the difference between success and failure. Feed only the amount your veterinarian recommends each day. If you feed more you're not likely to see the kind of weight loss you want.

Resist offering your pet treats from the table or in the form of "dog biscuits". These snacks are very often high in fat and can make weight loss a very frustrating effort. If you can't resist feeding treats, make the treat a nugget or two of his/her new low fat diet.

Try to make exercise a regular part of your pet's daily routine. The good part about a daily walk with your dog is that you both will likely benefit! Don't expect too much too fast. Most weight control programs take approximately 4-8 months to reach their goal. Regular, every two weeks, weigh-ins can be motivating and help to keep the program on course.

As a veterinarian I see many medical problems that require complex and expensive testing and treatment. Obesity on the other hand is simple to diagnose and in most cases simple and inexpensive to treat. If we can keep our pets trim we will quite possibly improve their quality and quantity of life. As a bonus, especially in these economic times, we'll also spend less on pet food.

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