



Nutrition for the Overweight Pet

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The occurrence of obesity in pets is increasing in the US just as it is in the human population. Many factors can contribute to obesity. Endocrine diseases, overindulgence with treats, and even certain pharmacologic agents may increase the risk of weight gain in pets. More and more pets spend a majority of their time indoors.

While this lifestyle has positive benefits for many aspects of their health, such as reducing the likelihood of contracting contagious diseases and trauma from cars or other animals, it usually results in decreased amounts of exercise. When this is coupled with excessive food intake, an overweight pet is the result. Additionally, some breeds can be predisposed to being overweight, such as the Beagle, Cairn terrier, or Basset hound.

Many owners view an overweight pet as simply a cosmetic issue. They do not understand the health risks involved with excess weight. Diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, osteoarthritis, and skin issues are more common in obese animals. One recent study revealed that obese dogs have a shorter lifespan than their normal weight counterparts! As pet owners, what should we do?

If your pet's body weight is 15% or more above normal, consult your veterinarian for a supervised weight loss program. If your pet's only slightly overweight or is a breed that's prone to obesity, a diet designed for preventing excess weight gain is a good choice for your pet. It's important to understand that in trying to manage an overweight pet, it is not recommended to substantially decrease the amount you feed of your pet's current food. In doing this, in addition to dramatically reducing the caloric intake, other nutrients such as proteins, vitamins, and minerals are likewise reduced. Since most pets have no other source to take in these nutrients, deficiencies could develop.

To maintain lean body mass instead of accumulating fat, the diet should contain adequate amounts of protein and reduced levels of fat. Protein can also be used as a source of energy by the body and is less likely to result in excess energy intake. Conversely, fat is a very efficient energy source, and that's why a reduction of the total fat a pet consumes is equally important in preventing obesity.

The amino acid L-carnitine is helpful because it allows the fat that is in the diet to be utilized by the pet's cells. This nutrient acts as transporter to take certain types of fats into the "powerhouse" of the cell called the mitochondria. There, through a series of chemical reactions, the fat is burned to form energy. If a pet burns more fat, less will be available to accumulate.

From a practical standpoint, a formula designed for obesity prevention should provide enough kibble to help the pet feel “full.” Lower kibble density helps by providing an increased volume of food with fewer calories. The animal can eat more of the food and feel satisfied, but take in less energy. This helps to reduce unwanted “food-seeking” or begging behavior in some animals.

The level of obesity in pets is approaching over 25%, affecting more and more pets. This increase will result in more cases of other diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and arthritis. If your pet is already obese, a veterinary-supervised weight loss program is the most effective approach. For pets who are slightly overweight or at risk of obesity for other reasons, Royal Canin diets such as Weight Care 27 for large breed dogs, Weight Care 30 for small breed dogs or Light 37 for cats can play a role in reducing the incidence of obesity. As always, prevention is much easier than treatment with this “growing” problem.