

OBESITY

About the Diagnosis

Cause: Obesity is a condition of elevated body weight due to unnecessary, excess body fat. It is caused by a consistent intake of energy (calories) that exceeds the expenditure of energy. There are many reasons why energy intake may exceed expenditure in dogs and cats. Some pets have a sedentary lifestyle. Exercise should be a daily activity for every dog and cat as long as other health problems are not prohibitive. Neutered dogs and cats are more likely to be overweight (mild to moderate excess of fat) to obese (severe excess of fat). It is thought that hormonal changes that occur as a result of neutering play a role in the development of obesity. As dogs and cats go through life stages (pediatric, adult, and geriatric), energy requirements change. Some foods provide too many calories for certain life stages. Similarly, events such as pregnancy and lactation demand diet changes to maintain proper weight and good health.

Some breeds of dogs may have a genetic predisposition to obesity including the cocker spaniel, basset hound, golden retriever, beagle, and dachshund. These breeds require fewer calories to maintain a healthy weight, and therefore they may easily become obese if fed amounts that are otherwise normal for other breeds of dogs.

Feeding practices play a major role in the development of obesity. Feeding treats often, particularly high fat table scraps, contributes to obesity. Some pet owners use treats to bribe their pets to perform certain behaviors (coming inside/going outside, performing tricks). These treats can add up to many calories in a 24-hour period. In households with multiple dogs or cats, one pet may occasionally consume the meal of its housemate without the pet owner's knowledge.

There are several medical conditions that can cause obesity; they include hypothyroidism, hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's disease), and other glandular problems. In general, these are very uncommon reasons for obesity, and by far the most common reason is a mismatch between what a dog or cat is being fed and what is actually needed by the metabolism.

Diagnosis: Obesity is extremely widespread; it is diagnosed in approximately 25-40% of dogs and cats seen in veterinary clinics. There are numerous methods of diagnosing this condition. The method used depends largely on your veterinarian's preference and experience.

Because obesity is often associated with other diseases, your veterinarian may need to perform several tests including a complete blood count (CBC), blood biochemistry profile, urinalysis, fecal analysis, and measurement of thyroid hormone levels if your pet is obese. These tests provide information about the general health of your dog or cat and are meant to identify medical reasons to explain obesity. Some abnormalities may be indicative of serious health problems and should be explored further.

Living with the Diagnosis

It is important to know that obesity can make many preexisting medical conditions worse. It is also linked to numerous, serious medical problems such as arthritis, diabetes mellitus, urinary bladder problems (feline lower urinary tract disease), dermatologic (skin) problems, heart and circulatory system problems, respiratory problems, and others. Pregnant dogs and cats that are obese have a greater chance of delivery problems (dystocia), presenting a risk to both the mother and offspring. The overall quality of life for obese dogs and cats often is greatly decreased, and the average life span of these animals is approximately 1 to 2 years shorter than pets of normal weight.

Fortunately, some of these disorders may decrease in severity with weight loss and appropriate treatment.

Obesity is preventable. Discuss weight management with your veterinarian when you bring any new pet home because avoiding obesity is an essential part of any dog or cat's health.

TREATMENT

If obesity is a problem for your dog or cat, then your veterinarian should take a complete dietary history. You will be asked the name and amount of food that you feed your pet, the type (dry or canned), how often you feed your pet, how often and what type of snacks (including table scraps) you offer, and other questions. It is important that these questions are answered honestly. The point of treatment is not to scold or be scolded, but to sincerely help

a companion's health by preventing problems that obesity causes.

Your veterinarian can calculate an ideal weight for your pet and can develop a weight loss program to help you work toward this goal. This program will gradually alter the current feeding regimen. The type of food, frequency of feeding, time of day for feeding, and other factors may change. A sensible exercise routine is also an important part of this program. Your compliance with this plan is required for its success.

Simply decreasing the amount of food currently offered is usually not sufficient to achieve weight loss. In fact, limiting your pet's food by too much can cause malnutrition, as well as food-seeking behaviors that can be unpleasant (digging through garbage, pestering you, etc.). There are many commercially available diets formulated for safe weight loss, and these leave pets feeling full while containing less energy and therefore promoting weight loss. Your veterinarian can recommend one that is appropriate.

DOs

- Inform your veterinarian if your cat or dog has ever been diagnosed with a medical condition and is taking medication.
- If medication is required, give it exactly as directed by your veterinarian. If you are concerned about possible negative effects, discuss them with your veterinarian immediately rather than simply discontinuing the treatment.

DON'Ts

- Do not substitute another diet without consulting your veterinarian.
- Do not make any dog or cat exercise in a hot, humid environment. Overweight pets have a lower tolerance to these conditions and serious health problems such as heatstroke, exhaustion, or heart problems may result.
- Do not be discouraged or frustrated with the time it takes to reduce a pet's body weight. Good nutrition requires gradual, not rapid, weight reduction, which often is not visible to the naked eye. Regular weighing (e.g., weekly) can help in this regard.

When to Call Your Veterinarian

- If your dog or your cat will not eat at all. Cats can develop a serious, life-threatening condition called hepatic lipidosis if they do not eat for 24 hours or more. In this "Catch-22" situation, weight loss can be pursued while avoiding a complete loss of appetite by gradually transitioning from the usual, energy-dense diet to the new, low-energy diet over 1 to 2 weeks, a little bit at a time.
- If you cannot keep a scheduled appointment.

Signs to Watch For

- General signs of illness: lethargy, weakness, decreased appetite, and other behavior changes such as aggressiveness and hiding more than usual

Routine Follow-Up

- Several follow-up appointments are required to assess body condition and to alter the diet and exercise regimen accordingly. It is reasonable to plan on monthly or even semimonthly visits to the veterinarian for the first 3 to 4 months of a weight loss program in order to monitor progress.