

When are clients open for nutritional recommendations?



Ronald Jan Corbee DVM, PhD, Dipl ECVCN

Importance

Nutrition is more than the sum of nutrients; it is considered a very important topic by pet owners, as it is part of daily caregiving, enjoyment, and important for the human-animal bond. Furthermore, giving food and/or treats is considered part of showing love and affection, or part of training (1). Pet owners often have strong beliefs when it comes to the pet food and treats that they select for their pets. It is not uncommon that these beliefs are based on incorrect information gathered from the internet, pet stores, or from other pet owners and breeders (2). The veterinary health care team is regarded an important and trustworthy source of information regarding pet food, so we should show the client that we care about nutrition just as much as they do (3). For people with strong beliefs in incorrect information, trust in the veterinary health care team is generally lower (2). We can gain the client's trust by applauding them for seeking information on pet nutrition and to guide them through the jungle of pet food information that is out in the open sources of information. Providing the pet owner resources with trustworthy information will also be helpful, so they do not only get information from the veterinary health care team, but also from other sources that reinforces our message. Stress on the things that they are already doing well, and give guidance on how to further improve nutritional management of their pets (4).

Life stages

Pets have different nutritional needs during the different life stages, and pet owners are well aware of this. A healthy start, and optimal transition to each life stage is considered important, and gives the veterinary health care team the possibility to discuss nutrition and to give nutritional recommendations.

Puppy/kitten

The first time that people visit their veterinarian is usually a puppy/kitten consultation. Especially new pet owners are very eager to hear that they are doing the right thing for their pet, part of which is the pet food they are giving. Most of the information so far comes from the breeder that usually weans the puppies and kittens on their diet of choice, based on personal preferences and beliefs (2). Pet owners will ask directly or indirectly about our opinion on the current feeding plan, which should consist of type of food, feeding amount and feeding frequency. Veterinarians can show their expertise by doing an extended nutritional assessment. Important for the final recommendation is to include the owners' preferences and expectations in order to be sure that the client will be compliant to the recommendation given. We all have the same goal, which is to raise the puppies and kittens in an optimal way towards adulthood.



Courtesy of Ronald J. Corbee

From puppy/kitten to adult

Depending on the breed size, puppies and kittens can be considered adults from roughly 9 to 24 months of age. Small breeds finalize their growth phase earlier than large breeds (5). Keeping growth charts and do regular checks of body weight and body condition score is often regarded

as something pet owners are interested in. Veterinary nurses/technicians also appreciate this and each visit gives an opportunity to talk about nutritional management, as well as other topics that are important during this life stage. At the end of the growth period, nutritional needs are different, thus a gradual change to a new food can be introduced.

Neutering

Neutering has a huge impact on the hormonal status on the pet. From a nutritionist perspective the most concerning effect is the increased likelihood for a pet to become overweight or obese (6). As veterinarians perform the surgery, this gives a great opportunity to discuss nutritional management in order to prevent overweight and obesity to occur. Ideally the conversation should start when the owner makes an appointment for neutering. A diet history can be obtained, and the effect of neutering on energy requirements can be discussed. This prevents having to discuss this on the day of surgery when the pet owner is usually excited or stressed, and therefore not very much receiving the information that is given on that day. Another opportunity to discuss nutritional management is to schedule a follow up appointment for wound control, where the veterinary health care team can check if the pet owner understood the message and also to follow up on body weight and body condition score.

From adult to senior

Similar to reaching the end of the growth phase, reaching the senior life stage also depends on breed size. Large breeds tend to live a shorter life, whereas small breeds live longer. When pets age, their nutritional needs change. Important considerations are body condition, muscle condition, and predisposition to certain diseases that become overt during the senior life stage. There are huge individual differences in reaching the senior stage, therefore it is important to discuss the senior life stage as well



Courtesy of Ronald J. Corbee

as nutritional management as soon as seniority has been confirmed by the veterinary health team during regular health check-up or consultation. A tailor made nutritional plan should be made based on risk assessment to be able to choose the most optimal senior diet or veterinary therapeutic diet (7).

Myth busting

As already stated in the introduction, pet owners sometimes have strong beliefs on pet food that is based on incorrect information. During consultations, this might come up when the veterinary health care team is taking a diet history. Applaud the pet owner for seeing information, emphasize what they are doing right and address your concerns is the best way to move forward. Be sure to be understanding and take into account that we all want to meet the same goal: doing the best for our pets (4).

Overweight/underweight conditions



Courtesy of Ronald J. Corbee

Overweight conditions often go unrecognized by pet owners, therefore nutrition conversations on this topic are tough (8). Opportunities to start the conversation about overweight is when it coincides with other medical conditions where weight loss/maintenance can make a difference, like for management of osteoarthritis. Because pet owners want to do the best for their pets and want them to live long and healthy lives we might be able to convince pet owners about tackling overweight at an early stage to prevent comorbidities as has been proven for osteoarthritis development in dogs (9). Underweight conditions, hyporexia, and anorexia

are very concerning for pet owners, as it is often seen as a negative determinant of quality of life. Apart from low body condition score, underweight can also be due to loss of muscle mass. This loss of muscle mass can be the result of disease, or gradual loss because of age (sarcopenia) which is an important component of frailty. Nutritional management plays an important role in treatment and prevention of frailty, and therefore a reduction in muscle condition score is an opportunity to discuss nutritional management with the pet owner (10).



Courtesy of Ronald J. Corbee

Therapeutic diets

Therapeutic diets have been developed for prevention, management and treatment of several diseases. Because of this, nutritional management should always be discussed with a pet owner when a new diagnosis is made to stress the important role that nutrition plays for the pet. For instance in chronic kidney disease, nutritional management is the most effective treatment option (11). Less well known is for example the role that nutrition plays in restoring the skin barrier function in case of atopic dermatitis (12). There are a lot of conditions for which nutritional management can make a difference either for treatment, support, or prevention. These conditions are grouped and discussed in several handbooks. For instance in the Purina Institute Handbook of Canine and Feline Clinical Nutrition (brain and behavioral disorders, cardiac disease, critical care, dermatologic disease, endocrine and metabolic disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, hepatic diseases, joint disease, lower urinary tract disorders, and renal disease) (13).

REFERENCES

1. Pretlow RA, Corbee RJ. Similarities between obesity in pets and children: the addiction model. *Br J Nutr*. 2016 Sep;116(5):944-9. doi: 10.1017/S0007114516002774. Epub 2016 Jul 29. PMID: 27469280; PMCID: PMC4983774.
2. Genever Morgan, Nicola Williams, Vanessa Schmidt, Daisy Cookson, Carrie Symington, Gina Pinchbeck. A Dog's Dinner: Factors affecting food choice and feeding practices for UK dog owners feeding raw meat-based or conventional cooked diets. *Preventive Veterinary Medicine*, Volume 208, 2022, 105741, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.prevetmed.2022.105741>.
3. Schleicher M, Cash SB, Freeman LM. Determinants of pet food purchasing decisions. *Can Vet J*. 2019 Jun;60(6):644-650. PMID: 31156266; PMCID: PMC6515811.
4. Alvarez, E. E., Schultz, K. K., Floerchinger, A. M., & Hull, J. L. (2022). Small animal general practitioners discuss nutrition infrequently despite assertion of indication, citing barriers. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 260(13), 1704-1710. Retrieved Jul 14, 2023, from <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.2460/javma.22.05.0226>.
5. Growth standard charts for monitoring bodyweight in dogs of different sizes. Salt C, Morris PJ, German AJ, Wilson D, Lund EM, et al. (2017) Growth standard charts for monitoring bodyweight in dogs of different sizes. *PLOS ONE* 12(9): e0182064. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0182064>.
6. Vendramini, T., Amaral, A., Pedrinelli, V., Zafalon, R., Rodrigues, R., & Brunetto, M. (2020). Neutering in dogs and cats: Current scientific evidence and importance of adequate nutritional management. *Nutrition Research Reviews*, 33(1), 134-144. doi:10.1017/S0954422419000271.
7. Julie A. Churchill, Laura Eirmann. Senior Pet Nutrition and Management. *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice*, Volume 51, Issue 3, 2021, Pages 635-651, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cvsm.2021.01.004>.
8. Churchill J, Ward E. Communicating with Pet Owners About Obesity: Roles of the Veterinary Health Care Team. *Vet Clin North Am Small Anim Pract*. 2016 Sep;46(5):899-911. doi: 10.1016/j.cvsm.2016.04.010. Epub 2016 Jun 2. PMID: 27264055.
9. Effects of diet restriction on life span and age-related changes in dogs. Richard D. Kealy and Dennis F. Lawler and Joan M. Ballam and Sandra L Mantz and Darryl N. Biery and Elizabeth H Greeley and George Lust and Mariangela Segre and Gail K. Smith and Howard D. Stowe. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 2002, 220, 1315-20.
10. Freeman LM, Michel KE, Zanghi BM, Vester Boler BM, Fages J. Usefulness of muscle condition score and ultrasonographic measurements for assessment of muscle mass in cats with cachexia and sarcopenia. *Am J Vet Res*. 2020 Mar;81(3):254-259. doi: 10.2460/ajvr.81.3.254. PMID: 32101040.
11. Joseph W. Bartges. Chronic Kidney Disease in Dogs and Cats. *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice*, Volume 42, Issue 4, 2012, Pages 669-692. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cvsm.2012.04.008>.
12. Witzel-Rollins, A., Murphy, M., Becvarova, I. et al. Non-controlled, open-label clinical trial to assess the effectiveness of a dietetic food on pruritus and dermatologic scoring in atopic dogs. *BMC Vet Res* 15, 220 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12917-019-1929-2>
13. Purina Institute Handbook of Canine and Feline Clinical Nutrition 2nd Edition, Lenox, Corbee, Sparkes Eds. 2023.