NUTRITION EXCHANGE

Fully Engage With Owners to Achieve Pet Weight Loss

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Successful weight loss is often elusive for many veterinary patients. Why is it so difficult—and how can veterinarians help?

Clients need guidance and support from the veterinarian if their pets are to lose weight. It starts with helping owners recognize when their animal has excess body weight. Clients may have a skewed perception of what ideal body condition looks like because they simply don't see dogs or cats at ideal body condition very often. Once the problem is recognized, weight loss requires a lifestyle change, which is an adjustment for both owner and pet. It's important that owners not think they're alone in this process. They need ongoing support.

Weight gain can be insidious, whatever the cause. How can veterinarians intervene earlier?

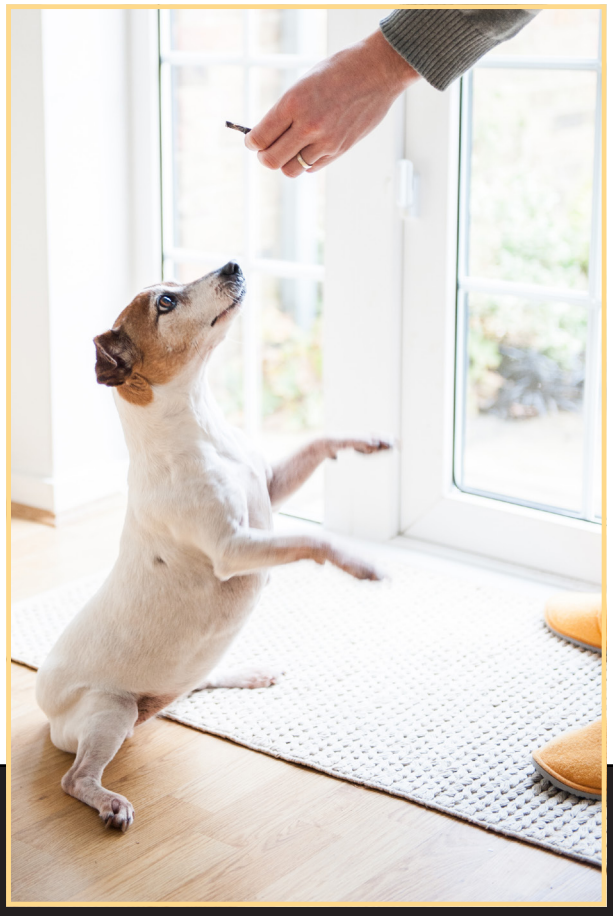
It's important to do a nutritional assessment at every visit, getting the body weight, body condition score, muscle condition score and diet history. Some of this can be preventive; if veterinarians are examining young, growing animals—maybe at the first annual visit, or at neutering or just after—it's essential to counsel clients about diet in a compassionate, encouraging, non-judgmental way. Continuing the nutrition discussion at every annual exam that follows gives veterinarians the opportunity to identify trends they're seeing in the pet's body weight or body condition and, if necessary, provide guidance on weight reduction.

Begging behavior is a serious impediment to pet weight loss. How can this issue be successfully addressed?

Pet owners should understand that treating is a learned behavior and a positive reinforcement for the pet. Some owners will say, "My dog doesn't want to eat dog food." That may be because they're treating the dog with something the dog perceives as higher value—for example, a piece of chicken—which creates positive reinforcement for the animal not to eat its regular food. Owners may think their pets are starving when they're begging but they're really just responding to this learned behavior. Many times, it's not about the treat itself, but the action of giving the treat. So rather than an owner giving a 25-calorie treat six times a day, I may switch them to a 3- or 4-calorie treat they can give just as often.

In some cases, the strong bond between people and pets can be part of the obesity problem. How can it be part of the solution?

Pet owners want their pets to live long, happy lives, and the responsibility of feeding an animal allows an owner to be an active participant in the pet's health and well-being. Healthy weight loss also presents an opportunity to enhance the human-animal bond because it typically results in improved mobility and activity levels for pets. Owners who have been successful at managing their pets' weight should be given credit at clinic visits. Even if things aren't always going the way we as veterinarians want them to go, if we have owners who are actively engaged and doing their best, that is meaningful.



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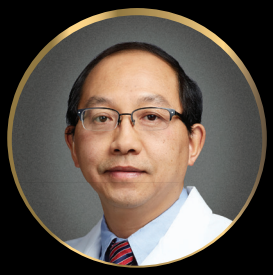

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One of the biggest hurdles to achieving weight loss in pets boils down to a simple fact: Losing weight requires consuming fewer calories. Unfortunately, this imperative can make life challenging for both pets and owners. Making careful decisions about what to feed a dog or cat on a weight management program, as well as how and when to feed them, can affect pets' quality of life, even as weight loss benefits their long-term health.

Nutrient know-how: The right diet makes a difference

When selecting a weight-management formula, veterinarians should consider protein, carbohydrate and fat levels, as well as water content. Ideally, the formula should be high in protein, low to moderate in fat, high in dietary fibre, and relatively low in carbohydrate in order to promote weight loss while preserving lean body mass.

• High dietary **protein** promotes preservation of lean body mass during weight loss[1] which helps maintain energy expenditure—an important factor both during and after the weight-loss period. If the pet loses proportionally more muscle, not only will the metabolic rate drop because muscle mass requires more calories for maintenance, but lost weight can quickly be regained.

Using a food toy or puzzle feeder can slow consumption and allow time for digestion of protein and fat.

• Dietary fibre is also beneficial in weight-management formulas. Satiety is the sense of "feeling full," and increasing levels of fibre – particularly insoluble fibre– increases food volume while rendering the food less calorically dense. It is important, however, to select a diet that is high in fibre and protein, as this combination has been demonstrated to enhance satiety in dogs.[2]

• In cats, increasing the amount of **water** in the diet (e.g., feeding a canned food) can help contribute to satiety[3] by diluting the caloric density of the diet and increasing the volume in the stomach.

How and when to feed

• The **rate of feeding** can be a factor; stretching out the pet's meals allows time for the digestion of protein and fat to trigger the release of satiety hormones. Using a physical barrier such as a food toy or a slow-feeding bowl is a simple but effective strategy to slow the feeding rate.

The right diet and feeding strategy can help keep pets satisfied and healthy.

• **Intermittent caloric restriction (ICR)** is another potential strategy. With chronic calorie restriction, the body adapts by lowering the metabolic rate.[4] This, in turn, makes weight loss harder to achieve and leads to a high rate of weight gain after weight loss.[5] Alternating days or weeks when restricted calories are fed with periods of normal caloric intake has been shown to prevent the body from adjusting the metabolic rate in dogs, thus achieving greater weight loss with only intermittent caloric restriction.[6]

Most of us prefer the sensation of a full stomach to that of hunger—and pets are no different. The right diet, along with the right feeding strategy, can help keep pets satisfied and healthy.

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2. Weber M, Bissot T, Servet E et al. A High-Protein, High-Fiber Diet Designed for Weight Loss Improves Satiety in Dogs. J Vet Intern Med 2007;21:1203–1208.
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4. German AJ, Holden SL, Mather NJ et al. Low-maintenance energy requirements of obese dogs after weight loss. Br J Nutr 2011;106: S93–S96.
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Successful Weight Loss Takes a Team Approach

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Weighing the pet, discussing the problem, formulating a plan, calculating the amount of weight to lose each week and determining the appropriate quantity of food are time-consuming tasks, and I as the veterinarian can't do it all myself. Our entire staff is invested in ensuring that pet owners stay the course when helping their overweight pets shed unwanted pounds.

Tell it like it is. Although broaching the subject of pet obesity can be awkward, my staff members don't hesitate. Our primary concern is the health of our patients, and extra weight can quickly lead to medical problems. Understanding that weight loss is about more than appearance is actually a powerful motivator. Whether weight loss is about treating an existing condition or preventing health problems from developing, we explain the role obesity can play in many conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, osteoarthritis and liver disease.

"Congratulations! You're doing a great job."

When the dog or cat has lost weight, celebrate. There's nothing like progress to keep everyone motivated to stay the course.

"Measure the food."

We carefully calculate the amount appropriate for each patient and provide a measuring cup that helps keep clients from feeding more than recommended.

Key Takeaways

- Veterinarians should talk with clients about nutrition and trends they're seeing in their pet's body weight or body condition at every annual exam.
- Veterinary teams should work together to make sure that every pet owner sees a weight-management plan as possible rather than impossible.
- Recommending a weight-management diet formulated with both high protein and high fibre, along with techniques that slow consumption or employ ICR regimens, can help pets and owners keep a handle on the hunger that accompanies caloric restriction.

Make clients feel empowered. The most important thing we can provide our clients is motivation. I want clients to know that my team will work with them to help reach their pet's goals. We're open and honest, but we always set a positive tone. As a team, we rely on each other to ensure that every pet owner sees the plan as possible rather than impossible.

Words of wisdom. Using the right words is essential to success. If you were to visit our clinic, the following are some statements you might overhear.

"The right diet is a must."

We recommend Purina®Pro Plan® Veterinary DietsOM Obesity Management® because it's low in fat and calories, has a high protein-to calorie ratio that promotes loss of body fat while maintaining lean body mass and is high in fiber to help contribute to satiety.

"Your pet hasn't done anything wrong."

We don't want clients to see putting their pets on a diet as a punishment.

"Get the whole family on board."

A pet won't lose weight if one family member is carefully following the plan while others are doling out treats and sneaking tidbits under the dinner table.

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