

UNDER THE WEATHER

The Fat of the Matter

Tobias walked in for his annual shots, looking happy as ever. He was accompanied by his svelte 'mommy' Tanaz. I was seeing him after a year – he'd obviously had no problems since his puppy shots and looked great overall. I gave him the once over while preparing the injections. "He's put on weight, hasn't he?", I asked. "Yes, doesn't he look cute?", asked Tanaz. Ummm yes, very cute but a little 'prosperous', I said, tongue-in-cheek. "Oh no! Are you saying he's fat?", she said. "No, no," I said, knowing how sensitive people are about weight issues, "but he'll get there if you're not careful with his diet and exercise."

Obesity is a serious problem. Not just in humans. Our non-human companions have as much of a problem due to this silent killer. And yet, when I try to explain about the need for weight loss I'm faced with a wall most times. Which is why I've put up a chart in my clinic which has body fat scores – this allows people to score their pets themselves in terms of their weight.

Why does your pet become overweight? It's very simple. His/her body is getting more calories than it can burn. In short, overeating, lack of exercise, or certain endocrine diseases that alters the body's fat burning and storage mechanism.

If your pet is overweight, take him for a thorough veterinary examination, including an accurate measure of body weight and an assessment of body condition score. Your vet will decide if this weight gain is normal and advise dietary changes. He/she may also decide to do certain tests, including a complete blood count, serum profile, including endocrine assays and urinalysis to determine if there is an underlying disease.

Assessment of your dog's current daily intake of food, treats, snacks, table foods and exercise schedule is important in the development of a successful weight loss programme. Clearly, if the calculated caloric intake exceeds the calculated daily



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energy requirement of the dog at an ideal body weight, then excessive caloric intake is the cause of the obesity.

Lower your dog's daily caloric intake by changing the dog food product (there are several diets formulated for weight loss) or the amount fed daily. Increasing fibre or water intake may sometimes be necessary to satiate your dog. Increase exercise activity. To enhance exercise, a variety of leashes and toys are available.

Your vet will also check for diabetes, thyroid and Cushings disease in case they contribute to the weight gain.

No matter what the cause, nutrition plays an important role in managing obesity. This involves explaining to the whole family as well as house staff that treats are to be restricted, and that they do more harm than good.

Exercise should also be a joint effort. Pets who are walked by walkers often get bored, and tend to walk less. They are much more enthusiastic and happy when their family members take them for a walk, so the whole family should try to make time for their their pets daily exercise. (This will help them as well!)

To achieve significant weight loss, the diet may be changed to a therapeutic veterinary diet specifically designed for weight loss. There are several commercial diets available for weight loss, and they help to reduce weight without cutting out on nutrients that the body needs. Owners must be willing to measure exactly the amount of food offered and minimise treats.

In terms of modern technology, pet care is certainly not lagging. Activity tracking devices similar to Fitbit are available for dogs, too! These devices track your pet's activity throughout the day, and you get the data directly on your smartphone. These are called 'pet points', and they help you achieve your pet's fitness goals, along with your own! 

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