



Overweight pets: why we should be concerned and what help is available

Approximately 41% of dogs and 32% of cats are overweight or obese in Australasia. Obesity occurs when pets consume more calories than they use up. Pets do not have to hunt for their food and they have access to very nutritious diets compared to their wild ancestors. However too much of a good thing can lead to serious health concerns for pets.

Contributing factors:

- **Genetics.** Just as some people are programmed towards a lean bodyweight and others easily put on weight, some pets will be more inclined to be overweight due to their genetic makeup. Labrador Retrievers are a good example of a breed of dog that often has a problem with obesity. "Moggy" cats (mixed breeds such as the domestic shorthair) are more likely to be obese than purebred cats.
- **Gender.** Neutered pets (both male and female) are much more likely to be overweight. This is because their energy requirements drop (called a reduction in resting metabolic rate) after neutering.
- **Age.** Very few pets under 2 years of age are overweight. After 2 years of age the prevalence of overweight pets increases and reaches a maximum at around 6 to 8 years of age.
- **Dietary factors.** Obesity in dogs is associated with the number of meals and snacks fed, as well as the feeding of table scraps. Excessive use of treats of human food may encourage excess consumption of food. Some cats cope very well with continuous availability of food but for many cats (and most dogs) this will lead to over consumption and weight problems.

Health risks linked to obesity:

Excess body weight has detrimental effects on a pet's health and life span. Diseases associated with obesity include:

- Heart disease
- Fatty liver disease
- Diabetes
- Arthritis
- Breathing difficulties

How to tell if your pet is overweight?

This is not always easy. Pets come in all shapes and sizes so determining ideal body condition is difficult. Pets are covered in fur coats which can mask early indications that they may be putting on weight!

Regular weigh-ins at your veterinary clinic will be very helpful. This is also a great way to get your pet used to going to the clinic apart from when they are stressed such as when they are sick or having shots. Keeping a check of weight over time is very important.

A tool called the body condition score allows you to assess your pet's body fat regardless of breed or individual variation. Your veterinary team can help you learn to do this yourself. Keep the chart in this magazine for reference. You need to be able to easily feel the ribs and see a good "waist" when you look down on your pet. Call in to your clinic and ask one of the team to help you learn to monitor your pets body condition score.

What can be done to avoid weight gain?

- Regular weight checks and body condition scoring will alert you to early problems
- Regular and appropriate exercise is good for you and your pet! Dogs must have daily exercise especially if they are kept indoors when you are at work during the day. Cats need exercise too! Games such as catching toys, chasing toys and hide and seek are great fun. Try to play with your cat for at least 10 minutes each day. This will benefit both their physical and emotional health.
- Decrease the amount of food your give your puppy or kitten once they have been neutered.
- Transition to a lower calorie food if you or your vet are concerned about





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possible excess weight gain. Your veterinary team may recommend a diet to suit your pet such as Hill's® Science Diet® Adult Light Canine or Feline, Hill's® Science Diet® Large Breed Adult Light Canine or Hill's® Science Diet® Adult Hairball Control Light Feline.

What to do if your pet is overweight?

Discuss the situation with your vet. Your vet will examine your pet to make sure there are no other health issues that should be checked out and then recommend appropriate diets and life-style changes.

Diet.

Dogs. Your vet can prescribe a special diet such as Hill's® Prescription Diet® r/d® Canine. This diet is specifically formulated to help with safe weight loss.

- Low calories
- High dietary fibre to help your dog feel full
- Right balance of soluble and insoluble fibre to increase digestibility
- Optimal level of protein
- High L-carnitine and lysine to help burn fat while preventing loss of muscle mass
- Once the optimal weight is reached, Hill's® Prescription Diet® w/d® Canine can be fed to maintain the ideal weight.

Cats. Cats can be difficult when it comes to changes in diet. Cats can develop liver disease if they loose weight too rapidly. It is very important to work with your veterinary team when trying to diet cats.

- Some cats will do well on a special low calorie, high fibre diet with high levels of L-carnitine such as Hill's® Prescription Diet® r/d® Feline.
- Some cats do better on an "Atkins" like diet. Hill's® Prescription Diet® m/d® Feline. This is a high protein diet, high in L-carnitine. This diet is often used to help manage diabetes in cats.
- Once your cat has reached the optimal weight, it can be maintained on Hill's® Prescription Diet® w/d® Feline or on an increased ration of Hill's® Prescription Diet® m/d® Feline

Lifestyle. Regular exercise and play are very important.

Helping your overweight pet with mobility issues. Pets that are overweight and have mobility issues such as arthritis need careful assessment and monitoring from your veterinary team. In many cases pets will have improved mobility with weight loss alone. However extra help such as medications and special mobility diets (such as Hill's® Prescription Diet® j/d® Canine and Feline) may be needed to get pets moving more comfortably. You may also need to consider moving your pet's bed and litter box to more easily reached locations and providing ramps to allow them to negotiate steps or for dogs to get into and out of cars.

Join Pet Slimmers! Pet Slimmers is a great tool that your veterinary team can use to help you achieve safe weight loss for your pet. It is even available as an on-line version so that you can monitor the weight loss in conjunction with your vet clinic. It is a fun way to involve the whole family and there are even prizes when the half way mark and ideal weight are reached! You can check out Pet Slimmers at www.petfit.co.nz and then talk to your vet team. There is even a Slimmer

of the Year contest and the winner receives a year's supply of the appropriate Hill's pet food. Obesity is a disease condition. If you are concerned that your pet is overweight, talk to your veterinarian and work together to achieve optimal health and quality of life.

* Article supplied by Dr Helen Beban, Hills pet Nutrition

