



## **Obesity: The Leading Nutritional Disorder in Pets**

Obesity is the leading nutritional disorder among dogs and cats. Studies suggest that over 30 percent of dogs and approximately 12 percent of cats examined at veterinary clinics are overweight.

### **Defining Obesity**

Obesity occurs when excess energy is converted into fat and stored as fat in the dog or cat's connective tissue. This accumulation of body fat may be gradual over many years or it may be rapid, depending on the difference between energy intake and energy use. Animals weighing 20 percent or more over ideal body weight are considered obese.

Among dogs the incidence of obesity increases with age, with a low of 12 to 21 percent at one to four years of age, up to about 40 percent over 12 years of age.

### **Dangers of Obesity:**

An overweight pet may be susceptible to health problems such as:

- \* the threat of a reduced life span;
- \* impaired heart and breathing functions;
- \* digestive disturbances;
- \* increased surgical risk - anesthesia levels are more difficult to assess and it may also be more difficult for sutures to stay in place;
- \* skin problems such as dermatitis - folds of skin resulting from rolls of fat may invite infection;
- \* heat stress - heat dissipation is impaired due to insulating properties of fat;
- \* increased stress on skeleton, ligaments and tendons which may be associated with excessive wear to joint surfaces and degenerative arthritis - this can lead to reluctance to exercise, exacerbating the problem;

\* reduced reproductive efficiency - decreased libido and semen quality in males or impaired fertility in females can cause lower litter size, increased puppy mortality rates and problems with whelping and nursing;

\* diabetes mellitus, particularly in overweight cats.

### **What Causes Obesity?**

The causes of obesity are generally divided into three categories:

Excess caloric intake is the most common cause. The pet consumes too much food and does not expend the energy required to use the calories and maintain normal body weight. Many pet owners encourage an overweight condition by overfeeding or giving excessive treats or table scraps.

Genetic predisposition may contribute to obesity, especially in certain breeds. For example, Labrador retrievers, beagles, basset hounds and dachshunds seem to be more susceptible to obesity than some of the other sporting or working breeds.

Endocrine imbalances such as thyroid or pituitary dysfunction may cause obesity.

If you believe your pet is overweight, an examination by your veterinarian is suggested. Any predisposing abnormalities can be diagnosed or treated or your veterinarian may recommend a weight reduction program.

### **Weight Reduction Guidelines**

The following feeding guidelines for pets who are overweight or have the tendency to become overweight are presented as suggestions. They are not intended to replace the advice of a veterinarian.

\* Reduce your pet's caloric intake by feeding less. A reduction of not more than one-fourth of the previous caloric intake is recommended.

\* Measure your dog's food. Without measuring, it's easy to overfeed.

\* Omit feeding food from the table. Often eliminating feeding table scraps is sufficient to achieve the desired weight reduction. Keeping your pet away from the area where the food is being prepared and served helps retrain it not to beg for or expect table scraps.

\* Do not feed high calorie treats.

\* If you are omitting table scraps or reducing the amount of food being offered, feed the daily amount in two or three servings. You will feed less, but help prevent your pet from feeling hungry and help keep it from begging.

\* Feed your dog a nutritionally complete and balanced diet formulated to aid in weight control such as Purina® Fit & Trim® brand dog food. It is lower in calories and fat, compared to the leading dry dog food, and provides a palatable diet for normal adult dogs with low to moderate activity.

\* Some cat foods are formulated to aid in feline weight control. Purina® Cat Chow® Mature(tm) Formula provides a nutritionally complete and balanced diet for a normal adult cat who tends to be overweight. It is 20 percent lower in fat and, bowl for bowl, has fewer calories than the leading dry cat food.

\* Do not allow your pet to have access to garbage cans or other sources of additional food.

\* The cooperation of all family members is needed to help ensure a successful weight reduction program.

\* Combine exercise with diet management.

\* Make certain fresh drinking water in a clean bowl is available for your pet at all times.

### **Protein and Weight Loss**

As a dog is slimming down, weight loss can come from loss of fat or the loss of lean body mass. Protecting against the loss of lean body mass is essential to a successful weight reduction program. This protection requires adequate levels of protein in a dog's diet.

Lean body mass represents the muscle component of the body. It accounts for about 95 percent of a dog's metabolic rate, the measure of how a body "burns" energy. Lean body mass "burns" more calories than body fat does. If lean body mass is lost during weight loss, a dog "burns" fewer calories from the accumulation of body fat.

The loss of lean body mass represents loss of muscle fibers and muscle fiber volume. This loss may result in diminished physical strength and motor coordination and a weakened immune system.

A weight reduction and maintenance diet should provide at least 25 percent protein. Purina® Fit & Trim® brand dog food with the Ulti-Pro Enhanced Protein System® provides this level to help maintain lean muscle mass, and to provide protein reserves to support a dog's immune system

during times of injury or infection. Dogs with inadequate protein reserves may appear to be healthy, but may be more susceptible to stress.

### **Important Cautions**

If you change your pet's diet to a lower calorie food, make the change gradually over a seven to ten day period. Add a small amount of the lower calorie food to the diet currently being fed. Each day increase the amount of the lower calorie food and decrease the current diet until the changeover is completed. This helps avoid digestive upsets frequently caused by sudden diet changes.

Dogs and cats should be at their recommended weight before breeding. Severe dietary restrictions during pregnancy may produce problems during gestation and lactation which could be more severe than an obesity problem.

### **Exercising Your Pet**

To get your pet in shape, begin with a moderate exercise program. If you have questions about establishing such a program, consult your veterinarian. Gradually increase the length of the walks and extend play period times.

Walking and games are beneficial for both you and your pet. Calories are burned off and the bond between the two of you is strengthened. However, owners should avoid tug-of-war or any other game that pits the pet against its owner.

At the beginning of an exercise program obese pets may experience fatigue. They also have little tolerance for heat and humidity. Watch for shortness of breath or other signs of fatigue and slow down or stop before your pet experiences any problems.

Although cats are not likely to respond to a planned exercise program, it is possible to encourage them to exercise through play. Toys with "cat appeal" can be as simple as a ping pong ball rolled across the floor or a piece of string dragged across the floor or dangled just out-of-reach.

Some cats can be taught to walk on a leash. Others can be taught to retrieve. Training for these activities should start during kittenhood.

### **Weight Reduction Varies from Dog to Dog**

Because each dog is an individual, weight reduction varies according to an individual dog's metabolism and individual differences in caloric requirements. A weight reduction study at the Purina Pet Care Center showed a marked variation in weight loss response.

Ten Labrador retrievers participated in the study. They were placed on a 27 percent calorie-restricted diet, based on the expected needs for each dog's body weight.

Once each dog's maintenance requirement was determined, it was found that caloric restrictions among the 10 dogs ranged from 1 percent to 35 percent, rather than the targeted 27 percent. This study demonstrates the variation in weight loss that is seen in dogs on a calorie-restricted diet.

Some dogs in the study were found to be "difficult losers" with lower calories requirements for weight maintenance. They utilize calories slower and respond gradually to calorie-restricted diets. The "easy" or "average weight losers" in the study had higher caloric requirements for weight maintenance and generally responded more rapidly to a weight-reduction program.

When a dog is placed on a lower calorie diet such as Purina Fit & Trim, feeding instructions on the package should be used as a guidelines. Adjustments in the amount to be fed have to be made to meet an individual dog's caloric needs and, at the same time, enable it to achieve and maintain the desired weight.

It's important to keep records of your dog's weight and the amount of food offered. This helps determine if your dog is an easy, average or difficult loser. A veterinarian can help plan an appropriate calorie-restricted diet based on an individual dog's needs.

Following weight loss, your dog's food intake should be controlled and the exercise program continued. Otherwise, the weight may be regained. Consult your veterinarian to plan a weight maintenance program.

### **Estimating Obesity**

Estimating obesity is sometimes difficult because standards vary among different breeds and among individual dogs and cats. A thick haircoat on a dog or long hair on a cat may tend to mask obesity or a thin condition.

Often estimating a dog's body condition does not reflect the amount of excess body fat, but reflect

**Obesity is the leading nutritional disorder in dogs and cats. Learn the dangers of obesity in dogs and cats as well as how to spot, prevent and treat it.**