

A **weighty** issue



This month, **Ray O'Mahony** MVB MRCVS CVH looks at the worrying rise of obesity in pets, the causes and the need for owners to ensure their animals adopt healthier lifestyles



Considering the regular headlines on the ballooning size of the nation, it is no surprise to learn that our pets are going the same way. Various studies across the USA, Australia, the UK and Europe estimate that between 29 and 43 per cent of dogs and cats are overweight and about 15 to 20 per cent are obese. Why is this not surprising? Well, they share our homes, our feeding habits and our sedentary lifestyles, so now they share our bulging waistlines too.

Vets and nutritionists classify an animal as overweight if it is 15 to 30 per cent above the recommended weight for the breed or body size, and obese if it is more than 30 per cent heavier than it should be. The disparity between an owner's assessment of their pet's condition and the vet's assessment is one of the key problems in dealing with the growing issue of pet obesity. In a recent study 47 per cent of the dogs examined were classed as overweight by the attending vet, yet only 17 per cent of the owners agreed with this assessment.

The easiest way of assessing an animal's

condition is to run a hand over its ribs. Ideally, the pet owner should be able to feel the ribs just under the skin, but if they are pushing through inches of fat then, clearly, there is a problem. Assessing the animal from the side, the pet owner should look at its belly and if this hangs down, this generally means the animal is carrying a lot of abdominal fat. Viewing from above, the animal should have an appreciable waist from behind its ribs to where it widens at the pelvis.

The health issues associated with obesity in pets are almost identical to those we hear from doctors regarding our own health. Being overweight puts more strain on the heart and causes overheating and exercise intolerance. It gives rise to skin problems, diabetes, asthma, collapsing trachea, arthritis and soft tissue injuries such as cruciate ruptures. It also reduces immunity and is associated with urinary tract disease such as urinary crystals and cystitis. Overweight animals are also more likely to have difficulty under general anaesthetic, which makes even routine operations like neutering much more of a risk.

Being overweight also significantly reduces lifespan. A study carried out by Purina over 14 years followed a group of labradors, with half allowed as much food as they wanted and the remaining dogs fed an amount equivalent to 75 per cent of that eaten by the original group. The second group lived on average two years longer.

So, with such insurmountable evidence why do the numbers of overweight pets continue to climb? A Hills study in a large population of dogs and cats found that although 50 per cent were overweight, some 76 per cent of their owners thought their pets were healthy. Clearly, there appears to be a real problem in people's perception of what is a healthy weight for their pets. In most cases the owner is the sole provider of food for their pet. Obesity occurs when the energy consumed outweighs the energy expended on a daily basis, so as long as owners continue to feed more than their pets need, the problem will continue.

Pet food manufacturers also need to make feeding guidelines clearer, as these are usually for dogs taking a reasonable amount of exercise. Few manufacturers have guides



that show lower recommended intakes for less active pets. Considering one in four owners admit to never taking their dogs for a walk, that's 25 per cent of the dog population eating too much already. This does not take into consideration the treats that are fed – many of which are full of fats and sugars – which add considerably to the daily calorific intake.

Weight loss programmes for pets should, in theory, be very easy to implement. After all, pet owners provide the food, so by just reducing intake they should enjoy a reasonable level of success. However, keeping clients motivated and dedicated to the task at hand is very difficult. We run weight loss clinics at our practice and find the key is to advise weight loss from benefits it will impart, rather than just for the sake of losing weight. Regular weight checks are very important and exercise is a key factor in not only reducing weight, but in maintaining any loss. This can be difficult to encourage, especially in an owner who takes no exercise him or herself. We try to spell out the benefits of exercise for both

pet and owner and emphasise the health improvements and enjoyment even very short walks will provide.

There are two licensed medicines, Slentrol and Yarvitan, available from vets that assist with weight loss in dogs. These work by reducing the absorption of fat from the intestine and by providing a sense of satiety. They are not quick fixes and should only be used as part of a well-constructed weight loss programme. Changing feeding habits is also useful. The food should be weighed and then divided into four meals a day, if possible. Putting a mark on the measuring cup means weighing need only be done once. Feeding smaller meals more regularly increases metabolism, thereby increasing weight loss. Advise pet owners not to feed late at night, so the animal has the chance to use up some of the energy from the last meal.

All treats should be cut out, or kibble can be taken out of the daily ration and used as treats. Begging should never be rewarded with food – instead give the dog or cat a little attention, a short brushing or a little play activity. Begging behaviour may initially increase but they quickly learn to disassociate this behaviour with the food result, however any lapse and it will set the programme right back to the beginning. It is very important to advise owners of the need to reduce feeding once an animal has been neutered, as changes in metabolism, post surgery, will quickly result in weight gain, if food is not reduced appropriately.





Most manufacturers produce weight loss diets now, with some combining senior and light or weight loss. Diets for overweight cats and dogs should be high in protein and micronutrients and low in carbohydrates and fats. Not all overweight animals are simply overfed, as conditions such as hypothyroidism and Cushing's disease will cause weight gain.

Ideally, any animal that is overweight should see a vet for a health check before embarking on a diet. Cats in particular should be examined before and during weight loss programmes, as they can become seriously ill due to hepatic lipidosis, a condition which can be fatal and occurs if overweight cats have their dietary intake reduced too dramatically.

Pet owners should also not forget rabbits and guinea pigs, and they too should be fed on a well-balanced diet and encouraged to exercise, as this boosts circulation and metabolism and makes for far more interactive and playful pets.

Being overweight is the most common preventable factor in ill health. Animals really do respond very quickly to any weight loss and owners are invariably amazed at how quickly their energy levels increase and at how much more interactive they become. Exercise and a diet suitable to the individual and its levels of activity are the key to a happy, healthy pet.

SUPPLIER LISTING

Burns Pet Nutrition:

www.burnspet.co.uk

Dorwest Herbs: www.burnspet.co.uk

Hilton Herbs: www.hiltonherbs.com

H.G Gladwell: www.copdockmill.co.uk

Natural Pet Products:

www.naturalpetproductsltd.com

Phytoforce: www.phytoforce.ie

