

YOUR PETS

Weight matters for dogs and cats. Here are some easy ways to help them stay trim.

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WE SHOWER OUR PETS with love: We buy them comfy beds, dress them in stylish collars, and give them treats by the handful. But according to a 2008 study by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, when it comes to feeding, we may be killing them

PET OBESITY ISN'T A PET PROBLEM; IT'S A PEOPLE PROBLEM.

with kindness: More than 40 percent of dogs and nearly 60 percent of cats are overweight or obese.

In general, obesity is defined as being 15 percent to 20 percent above ideal weight. Your vet can evaluate your pet's health and then help track her progress if weight loss is the goal. As a guideline, you should be able to feel (but not see) your pet's ribs. Dogs should have a discernible waist when looked at from above; cats should have a trim stomach.

Excess weight isn't just about appearance. Even a few extra pounds can lead to serious conditions, including osteoarthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. "A sedentary lifestyle can also exacerbate behavior problems such as chewing and scratching," says Michael Andress, a veterinarian in Greensboro, North Carolina. "Pets need something to do to ward off boredom and angst."

Why have our cats and dogs been putting on pounds? "Pet obesity isn't a pet problem; it's a people problem," pet nutritionist Susan Lauten says. When we have less time to walk the dog or play with the cat, we often ease our guilt by offering treats and table scraps, which may be chock-full of sugar, fat, and calories. Many pet owners also give treats too frequently as rewards for good behavior. Sometimes it's better to offer a simple "Good dog!" Remember that you control what your pets eat. If you're committed to providing a healthy diet, they'll not only lose weight but also live longer.

FEEDING TIPS

READ THE LABEL Whole foods, such as beef and chicken (rather than animal by-products), should be at the top of the ingredients list of your pet's food. Also make sure the package bears a stamp from the Association of American Feed Control Officials and states that feeding trials were performed.

CONTROL PORTIONS Use a measuring cup and feed your pet the minimum amount of food recommended on the package for a pet's ideal weight range, rather than for her current weight. Consider serving smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day.

GIVE HEALTHY SNACKS Replace treats with a few pieces of kibble or fresh fruits and vegetables, such as apples, green beans, and carrots. Chew toys, playtime, a long walk, and a belly rub are also fine rewards.

EXERCISE ADVICE

GET MOVING As your dog loses weight, gradually increase her walks to 30 to 45 minutes a day. If you're pressed for time, consider a dog walker.

HIT THE POOL Exercising on an underwater treadmill and swimming in a pool are great options for dogs with arthritis or mobility issues.

MAKE TIME FOR PLAY Engage your cat in at least two active 10-minute play sessions each day. Fishing-pole toys (with feathers on the ends) are a good bet to get your cat jumping.

HAVE FUN WITH FEEDING Motivate your cat to get off the sofa by placing kibble inside a food-dispensing toy (make your own by poking small holes in an empty plastic bottle). Leave kibble around your house—such as at the top and bottom of stairs—to bring out her natural hunting instincts.

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