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Overweight, Obesity and Pain in Dogs: Action Steps

Overweight and obesity have emerged as the most important disease processes in dogs today. The perils of obesity are far-reaching. It shortens dogs' lives and can actually contribute to chronic inflammatory pain. The good news is that obesity is preventable. More good news is that even if a dog is overweight or obese, the disease can be reversed, normal body condition can be restored, and life expectancy can be returned to normal.

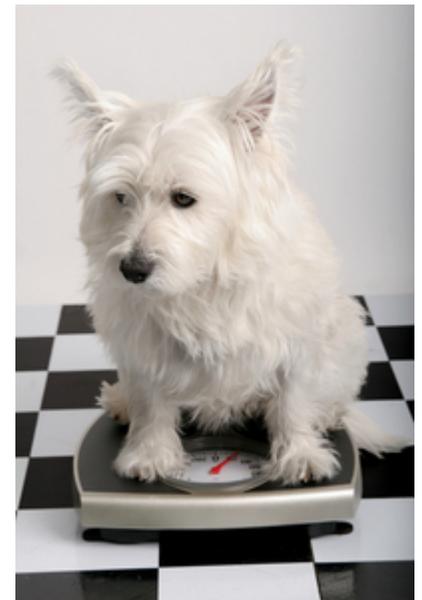
Overweight and obesity in dogs is preventable.

Why is obesity so widespread in dogs?

Many factors of our modern life with dogs contribute to the increased prevalence of canine obesity. Most dogs no longer work for a living. They don't herd cattle or sheep, hunt or retrieve game, or rescue lost hikers in the woods. Also, most dog owners must go to work each day, dramatically limiting how much time their pets spend outdoors exercising. In addition, when dogs are permitted to eat free choice (when food is left in the bowl all day), it is easy for dogs to eat more calories than they need. The bottom line is that when calories taken in exceed calories expended, weight gain is inevitable, leading to overweight and obesity.

How does being overweight or obese contribute to pain in my dog?

As covered in the overview article on the same subject (Overweight, Obesity and Pain in Dogs: Overview), overweight and obesity set the stage for joint damage and osteoarthritis (OA), leading to chronic pain. Until recently, veterinarians thought that the increased pain and inflammation associated with OA in overweight and obese dogs was primarily due to increased wear and tear on the joints. What we now know is that fat tissue is very biologically active and secretes hormones and other chemicals that both cause and enhance inflammation.



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Fat itself also contributes to inflammation; inflammation is a part of the pain associated with OA and degenerative joint disease; and overweight and obesity contribute to this vicious cycle.

How can I prevent my dog from becoming obese in the first place?

Here are some effective strategies for preventing dogs from becoming overweight or obese:

1. Ask your veterinarian to help you choose the most appropriate food for your dog. Puppies need a food that is formulated for their life stage, one that will meet their specific nutritional needs, rather than an “all-purpose” dog food. Moreover, large-breed puppies need a different nutrient profile than small-breed puppies so they will grow more slowly, minimizing the risk of orthopedic problems later in life. Adult dogs have different needs from puppies, so a puppy formulation is not the best choice for them. Your veterinarian can suggest the best age to switch to an adult food. And senior dogs are in yet another life stage that needs its own formulation for optimal health. Furthermore, dogs with certain health conditions or diseases have very specific nutritional requirements. (For further information on feeding your dog, see our handout “Nutrition—General Feeding Guidelines for Dogs.”)
2. Portion control is critical. Most dog food bags overestimate the amount of food a dog needs, so ask your veterinarian for a portion recommendation, and stick to it!
3. Choose specific meal times, and then be consistent. Dogs learn quickly when food is available and when it is not. This minimizes what we may perceive as “begging” behavior.
4. Consider using interactive feeding toys. These types of toys allow dogs to “work” for their food. Dogs eat more slowly, and they have the added bonus of expending more calories.
5. Increase your dog’s exercise. We know that optimal body condition score depends on the balance between calories taken in and calories expended. We also know that we benefit from increasing our dog’s activity because it means we increase our activity. There is no better way to blend the business of weight management with the pleasure of time outside than to walk our dogs. Other calorie-burning dog activities include swimming (be safe around water, and don’t force your dog to swim), fetch, and running with you. Be sure to clear high-intensity activities with your veterinarian, and then condition (build up endurance) steadily.
6. We can assess your dog’s body and muscle condition score at each visit. These assessments can help you keep track of your dog’s condition; if your dog is heavy, your veterinarian can provide an estimated ideal body weight to use as a guide during weight loss.
7. Accountability keeps us honest. Schedule regular weigh-ins at your veterinarian’s office to track both weight and body condition score in your dog’s medical record. Trends up or down can be identified early, and minor feeding adjustments can be made. Minor modifications are always easier to make than major transformations.



What is my take-home message?

Our canine friends do not deserve to hurt. Fat tissue plays an active role in perpetuating pain. Reversing overweight and obesity in dogs—or better yet, preventing it in the first place—is truly a pain prevention and management technique. With a bit of planning and some simple monitoring, dogs can maintain the svelte figure nature intended and can live their best life for as long as physically possible.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Robin Downing, DVM, CVPP, CCRP, DAAPM

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