

A tabby cat with orange eyes and a blue-tipped tail stands on a light blue surface. To its right is a blue pet feeder filled with brown kibble, which is placed on a white kitchen scale. The background is a soft-focus blue and green gradient.

Watching Their Weight

Keys to keeping your pet fit

By Alison Landis Stone and Andrea Vardaro

Does your pet waddle when he walks? Is he often out of breath? Are his ribs covered by fat? If you answered “yes” to these questions, your pet is probably overweight and perhaps even obese. In fact, even if your pet is fit, you should not become complacent about his weight. By feeding your pet the right food, limiting treats, and making sure he gets enough exercise, you can help keep your pet trim and healthy.

Just like people, pets most often become overweight by eating too much and not exercising enough. Overweight pets are not healthy. They are at risk for many problems, including heart disease, respiratory distress, diabetes, and arthritis. Pets that carry extra weight are also more prone to developing joint and back pain, hip problems, and endocrine diseases. You can add years to your pet’s life by keeping him at an ideal weight.

STARTING YOUNG

Ideally, you want to begin watching your pet’s weight when he is little. That way, you can ensure that he stays at an ideal weight and avoids weight-related health problems. Another advantage of a lifelong maintenance plan is that it is easier to help your pet maintain a healthy weight than it is to help him lose excess pounds.

“A pet’s dietary needs will vary throughout his life, from kitten- or

puppyhood to active adulthood to the golden years. His lifestyle may also change,” says Dr. Christine Merle, a consultant with Brakke Consulting. “This is why, at every veterinary visit, one of the most important parts of the examination is the weight check.”

ANTICIPATING AGE

It is extremely important to monitor the weight of older pets. “Pets become less active with advancing age; thus, their daily caloric requirements decrease,” explains Dr. Don Beitz, an animal nutrition professor at Iowa State University and chairman of the National Research Council committee that recommends dietary guidelines for dogs and cats.

BARNEY—A SUCCESS STORY

Before: At 65 pounds, 6-year-old Barney James was 11 pounds overweight. To help get Barney back to a healthy weight for his size, Dr. Williams of the Castle Canine Clinic made several recommendations:

- A switch from grocery-store-brand food to Hill's® Prescription Diet® Canine r/d®, a less calorie-dense food formulated for weight loss
- Evening walks for Barney, working toward a goal of four 40-minute walks weekly
- Supervised meals for Barney's terrier companion Eli, whose food Barney regularly "shared"
- Monitored snacking consisting of four Hill's® Prescription Diet® Canine treats daily
- Biweekly weigh-ins



After: Dr. Williams' weight-loss team charted Barney's progress, provided encouragement, and celebrated successes with Barney's owner. Among them:

- Barney returned to a healthy weight of 52 pounds and began acting like a much younger dog.
- The walks also helped Barney's owner to lose some unwanted weight. Nightly walks became anticipated events, giving the entire James family quality time together and improved health.

The problem is that older pets often continue to eat the same amount and type of food. "As pets age, their ability to digest certain foods may change," says Dr. Merle, adding, "Any changes in a pet's eating habits should be discussed with a veterinarian because rapid weight loss or inappetence can also be signs of disease."

You can also use the interactive weight tool at www.petfit.com to gauge your pet's body condition.

Your veterinarian is the best source for helping you to figure out your pet's ideal weight. "Many veterinarians use body condition scoring to determine whether a pet needs to lose weight," explains Dr. Merle. Veterinarians as-

It is estimated that as many as 40% of American pets are overweight or obese.

WEIGHING IN

If you are not sure how your pet's weight stacks up, you can get a general sense of how healthy he is by checking the following:

- His rib cage should be easy to feel.
- His abdomen should have a "tuck-in" in front of the hips.
- When viewed from above, his torso should be shaped like an hourglass.

sess a pet by looking at his body shape, fat over the ribs, overall build, breed, and health. The resulting score helps the veterinarian and owner keep track of the pet's weight.

PLANNING AHEAD

Work with your veterinarian to devise a weight-management plan based on your pet's body condition score, lifestyle, age, and breed. The plan

should specify food (what kind of food to feed, how much to give, and how often), acceptable snacks, and exercise.

By discussing your pet's weight, eating habits, and activity at each visit, you can help your veterinarian determine how well the plan is working. Based on these and other factors that can cause a pet's weight to fluctuate, he or she will modify the plan accordingly. A weight-management plan usually needs to be adjusted several times throughout a pet's life.

SHAPING UP

If your pet is already overweight, do not despair. You can start getting him into better shape right now. Set up an appointment with your veterinarian, who will assess your pet's condition. He or she will first perform a thorough physical examination to rule out any underlying medical concerns. The next step will be to evaluate your pet's current diet, daily caloric intake, and physical activity. Finally, he or she will establish how much weight your pet needs to lose and work out a weight-reduction plan.

For those pets that need to lose a large amount of weight, it is best to start them off slowly. "Begin feeding the pet a smaller percentage of the current daily intake until the pet reaches his ideal body weight," suggests Dr. Beitz. "Another option is to maintain the same food intake but make sure the pet gets some vigorous exercise every day if possible." Other overweight or obese pets may need some combination of less food and more exercise.

MOVING FORWARD

Regardless of whether your pet is currently in shape or overweight, exercise is always a good idea. "A healthy lifestyle for you and your pet includes a well-balanced diet and plenty of exercise," says Dr. Merle. "So, make a resolution to have your entire family—four-legged members included—focus on eating right and enjoying the fresh air. It will do everyone good." 🐾