

The Underlying Cause of Disease That Hardly Anyone Considers

If your pet suffers with arthritis, bladder or urinary tract disease, liver disease, or diabetes, it's time to look beyond the condition. The cause might not be what you or your veterinarian thinks. Take 30 seconds and follow these 4 do-it-yourself steps to see for yourself.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Fifty-eight percent of U.S. cats and 54% of U.S. dogs were overweight or obese in 2015
- Excess weight in dogs and cats can shorten lifespan and lead to conditions such as arthritis, bladder and urinary tract disease, liver disease, diabetes and more
- Most cases of pet overweight and obesity are due to overfeeding or feeding the wrong types of foods
- Many low-calorie or “diet” pet foods are filled with grains that may add to your pet’s weight problem
- A high-protein, low-carb diet with the right amount of calories for weight loss, controlled through the portions you feed, is what will take the weight off your dog or cat

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The majority of dogs and cats in the U.S. are not a healthy weight, according to the latest research by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP). The organization revealed that 58% of cats and 54% of dogs were overweight or obese in 2015.¹

Although pets have been steadily gaining weight for years, obesity has yet to be recognized as a disease by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).

There’s not even a consensus among veterinary practitioners and industry stakeholders about where the line should be drawn between overweight and obesity. Clinically, pet obesity is defined as weighing 30% above ideal weight, but this varies among practitioners.

Ultimately, though, the definition of overweight and obesity is far less important than what to do about it. Unfortunately, many veterinarians are misguided toward this end and may hinder your pet’s health with inappropriate weight-loss strategies.

What Are the Risks of Pet Obesity?

Excess weight in pets leads to consequences similar to those in people. Claims for arthritic pets rose nearly 350% from 2011 to 2012,² and arthritis was still the most common obesity-related disease in dogs as of 2015.

The extra weight puts stress on joints, which can leave your pet unable to get around. Pets may end up being euthanized for this reason, when maintaining a healthy weight could have prevented or reversed the problem.

In cats, the most common obesity-related complication is bladder and urinary tract disease, according to pet insurance provider Nationwide.³ The company used their database of 550,000 pets to determine the top obesity-related conditions, as follows. Claims for such conditions rose 10% since 2014.⁴

- Most Common Dog Obesity-Related Conditions

1. Arthritis
2. Bladder/urinary tract disease
3. Low thyroid hormone production
4. Liver disease
5. Torn knee ligaments
6. Diabetes
7. Diseased disc in the spine
8. Fatty growth
9. Chronic kidney disease
10. Heart failure

- Most Common Cat Obesity-Related Conditions

1. Bladder/urinary tract disease
2. Chronic kidney disease
3. Diabetes
4. Liver disease
5. Asthma
6. Arthritis
7. High blood pressure
8. Heart failure
9. Gall bladder disorder
10. Immobility of spine

Does Your Pet Need to Lose Weight?

One APOP survey conducted found that nearly 46% of dog owners and more than 45% of cat owners believed their overweight or obese pet was a normal weight.⁵

If you're not sure, ask your veterinarian, but you can also use the following steps to get an idea of your pet's body condition:

- Look down on your pet from above

- You should see a tapered-in waist
- An oval-shaped pet is typically overweight
- An hourglass shape is typically normal weight

Further, you should be able to feel (but not see) your pet's ribs as well as the bones near the base of his tail (his pelvis). If your pet is obese, you'll be able to see noticeable amounts of excess fat on the abdomen, hips and neck.

Some Pets Are More Prone to Weight Gain Than Others

Pets can't help themselves to their own food, so in most cases pet overweight and obesity are due to overfeeding or feeding the wrong types of foods. That being said, there are other risk factors as well, including:

- **Breed** — Certain breeds of dogs are more apt to be overweight than others, including cocker spaniels, dachshunds, Dalmatians, golden retrievers, Labrador retrievers, Rottweilers, Shetland sheepdogs and mixed breeds.
- **Gender and neutering** — Animals that are completely desexed (spayed or neutered, where all of their sex-hormone-producing tissue is removed) are at an increased risk of gaining weight.
- **Age** — The risk of overweight increases as your dog or cat gets up in years, as metabolism naturally slows.
- **Activity level** — Lack of sufficient exercise increases the risk of obesity in your pet.
- **Diet and feeding habits** — Pet foods high in carbohydrates ("low fat" and "diet" foods that contains too many starchy potatoes, rice, wheat, corn or legumes) are the biggest cause of obesity in both dogs and cats, especially when following the feeding instructions on the bag.

Most pet food companies suggest feeding more calories than pets actually burn. If your pet is gaining weight on the amount of food you are feeding, you are feeding too much food. Too many treats can also be a problem, as can an "all-day-buffet" feeding schedule in which your pet's bowl is kept constantly full.

Do Animals Exercise to Keep Fit?

It's not unusual for humans to exercise solely for the purpose of getting fit, but do other animals also engage in physical activity to stay agile, fast and strong? Such gains would be beneficial to an animal living in the wild, after all, not only to avoid predators and find food but also to reproduce.

Obesity is not an issue that plagues wild animals, only those in captivity. Whether or not animals exercise to keep fit is an intriguing question being explored by Lewis Halsey, Ph.D. of Roehampton University.⁶ It could be, for instance, that animals prioritize fitness depending on their environment.

Giant pandas living in a zoo may not worry about aerobic fitness the way wild giant pandas might. Other species appear to stay fit even with very little effort. Halsey told Science Daily:⁷

"Barnacle geese appear to get fit for certain predictable, planned events such as migration and yet miraculously seem able to do so with little or no voluntary exercise. So their bodies seem to trigger increased fitness from within — they get fit automatically when they need to."

Whether or not other animals put in effort to maintain their speed and other elements of fitness remains to be seen. Halsey continued:⁸

"If animals are undertaking activities solely or partly to keep fit, this opens up a significant new facet to our understanding and interpretation of animal behavior. No one has previously observed animal behaviors and thought 'this behavior could be associated with keeping fit.'"

Your Pet Needs Exercise to Stay Lean and Fit

There's no doubt that domestic pets need regular opportunities for activity in order to maintain a healthy weight and other aspects of fitness.

Daily exercise, including at least 20 minutes of consistent, rigorous aerobic activity, along with opportunities for active play, sprinting and chase (throwing a ball), will help your pet burn fat and increase muscle tone. Physical activity will also help your pet's mental health and help prevent boredom and destructive behaviors.

If you're unable to provide your pet with this level of exercise (and some pets may need even more), you might consider joining a **pet sports club** or at least a doggy daycare that gets your pet moving. Another option is to hire a dog walker (or even a cat walker!).

Two More Weight-Loss Strategies

Aside from exercise, the most important aspect of weight loss for pets is food. You should not attempt to put your pet on an extreme diet (or substantial calorie restriction) or withhold food (except if you've been feeding "buffet style"). Scheduled, consistent feeding times are very important.

This is especially important for cats, because overweight kitties are prone to hepatic lipidosis, or fatty liver disease, and need to lose weight slowly. As your cat's body senses weight being lost, it will begin to mobilize accumulated stores of fat. If weight loss occurs too quickly, the rush of fats being mobilized can overwhelm the liver and shut it down.

Instead of trying to force rapid weight loss, which can be dangerous for your pet, use the following approach to help your pet slim down gradually (and safely):

- **Feed a balanced, species-appropriate diet to your pet** — Regardless of his weight, your pet needs the right nutrition for her species, which means food that is high in animal protein and moisture, with low or no grain content. Please be aware that many low-calorie or "diet" pet foods are filled with grains that may add to your pet's weight problem.

Remember, carbohydrates that aren't burned are converted to fat. The fastest way to make your pet fat is to feed a diet high in starch. A high-quality, low starch, fresh-food diet is an excellent choice for most pets in need of weight loss.

- **Practice portion control** — Usually a morning and evening meal, carefully measured. A high-protein, low-carb diet with the right amount of calories for weight loss, controlled through the portions you feed, is what will take the weight off your dog or cat. And don't forget to factor in any calories from treats.

Sources and References

[Nature World News January 22, 2016](#)

¹ [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention March 15, 2016 \(Archived\)](#)

² [Public Health Nutr. 2010 Jan;13\(1\):102-6](#)

³ [CBS News January 12, 2016](#)

⁴ [PR Newswire January 6, 2016](#)

⁵ [PetfoodIndustry.com March 14, 2013](#)

⁶ [Journal of Animal Ecology May 2016](#)

^{7, 8} [Science Daily January 20, 2016](#)
