

What All Dogs Need Every Day, Without Fail

This may seem like a no-brainer, but it's dismaying how many pet owners ignore this important tenet of pet ownership. Ignore this and be prepared for the increased possibility that your beloved pup lives a shorter life and with their quality of life sacrificed along the way.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- According to pet insurer Nationwide, over 1.3 million policy holders filed claims for obesity-related diseases in pets in 2016
- The pet obesity epidemic continues unabated, as does the number of overweight pets acquiring painful, debilitating diseases as a result
- Some pet owners don't realize their dog is overweight because fat pets have become the new normal, and many vets do not address excess pounds during veterinary visits
- To successfully take weight off your dog and keep it off, consistent daily aerobic exercise is essential
- Another essential ingredient is what and how much you feed your dog; the key is to meet all his nutritional requirements with a species-appropriate diet while simultaneously reducing the amount he is fed

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Pet obesity has constantly been on the rise, along with all the disorders that inevitably result when animals are overfed and under-exercised. According to pet insurer Nationwide, in 2016 over 1.3 million pet owner claims totaling more than \$60 million were submitted for obesity-related diseases, which equates to a 23% increase in just 3 years.¹ Per Nationwide, the top 10 obesity-related diseases in dogs last year were:

1. Osteoarthritis
2. Cystitis/urinary tract disease
3. Hypothyroidism
4. Hepatitis/Hepatopathy
5. Cruciate ligament injuries
6. Diabetes
7. Intervertebral disc disease
8. Chronic renal disease
9. Congestive heart failure
10. Lipomas

Obesity-related diseases are entirely preventable, and yet they continue to increase in dogs year after year. Most of them shorten an already too-short lifespan and often destroy the animal's quality of life along the way.

It's incredibly frustrating to see so many dogs these days being overfed and under-exercised to the point of developing one or more devastating diseases. Especially when it's so easy to keep them at a healthy weight and in good physical condition.

Is Your Dog Overweight? Here's How to Tell

One of the problems pet obesity experts have uncovered is that unfortunately, overweight dogs have become the "new normal" and as a result, many people can't tell the difference between a fat dog and a normal-sized dog.

If you're not sure about your own pet, look down at her from above. You should be able to see a tapered-in waist. If she's oval-shaped, she's probably too heavy. You should also be able to feel (but not see) her ribs as well as the bones near the base of her tail. If she's obese, you'll see noticeable amounts of excess fat on her abdomen, hips and neck. Also have a look at this body condition chart provided by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP):

Body Condition Scoring

1



Ribs, spine and bony protrusions are easily seen at a distance. These pets have lost muscle mass and there is no observable body fat. Emaciated, bony, and starved in appearance.

2



Ribs, spine and other bones are easily felt. These pets have an obvious waist when viewed from above and an abdominal tuck. Thin, lean or skinny in appearance.

3



Ribs and spine are easily felt but not necessarily seen. There is a waist when viewed from above and the abdomen is raised and not sagging when viewed from the side. Normal, ideal and often muscular in appearance.

4



Ribs and spine are hard to feel or count underneath fat deposits. Waist is distended or often pear-shaped when viewed from above. The abdomen sags when seen from the side. There are typically fat deposits on the hips, base of tail and chest. Overweight, heavy, husky or stout.

5



Large fat deposits over the chest, back, tail base and hindquarters. The abdomen sags prominently and there is no waist when viewed from above. The chest and abdomen often appear distended or swollen. Obese.



Association for Pet Obesity Prevention

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Your goal for your dog should be a body condition score of 3. Unfortunately, many owners assume their pet's body score is just fine because their veterinarian never mentions their pet has a weight issue during exams. Veterinarians fail to address extra pounds for many reasons, including because it can be an uncomfortable conversation.

All Dogs, Especially Fat Ones, Need to Get Daily Exercise

Consistent daily exercise, including at least 20 minutes (and preferably 60) of aerobic activity will help your dog burn fat and increase muscle tone. If you're unable to provide him with this much physical activity (and some dogs require even more), consider joining a pet sports club or doggy daycare. Another option is to hire a dog walker (or dog jogger, hiker or biker), although exercising your own dog gets YOU moving, too.

If your dog is very overweight or obese, he may not be able to endure extended periods of exercise initially. Swimming is actually an excellent low-impact, gentle form of exercise for dogs that need to start out slow, as well as those with arthritis or mobility issues. Ask your veterinarian what exercises are safe for your dog to do, and which you either need to avoid or put off until he's in better condition.

What and How Much to Feed an Overweight Dog

Pet foods high in carbohydrates — typically kibble — are the biggest cause of obesity in both dogs and cats. Your dog needs food high in animal protein and moisture, with low to no grain content (which is pretty much the opposite of what dry pet foods offer). A high-quality fresh food diet is the best choice for pets in need of weight loss. It's important to adequately nourish your dog's body as weight loss occurs, making sure her requirements for key amino acids, essential fatty acids and other nutrients are met.

The key to healthy weight loss is to meet your pet's nutritional requirements through a balanced diet but feed less food (portion control), which forces her body to burn fat stores. The first step is to transition her to a diet free of potatoes, corn, rice, soy and tapioca. Ideally, feed a homemade fresh food diet, comprised of lean meats, healthy fats and fibrous vegetables and low glycemic fruits as the only sources of carbohydrates.

Next, calculate kcal (kilocalorie) requirements for your dog's ideal weight. Then measure her food portions using an actual measuring cup and drastically limit treats (be sure to include treats in her total daily calorie count).

Set aside a small portion of homemade food that can be rolled into tiny pea-sized bites and used as treats throughout the day. Other options are berries and frozen peas, and also homemade chicken jerky you (don't feed commercial jerky treats, as many have been linked to pet illnesses).

Small amounts of other fruits (melons and **blueberries**, for example) as well as tiny cubes of low-fat cheese also make good treats. Just be sure to feed quantities that are no more than a 1/8th inch square. In the beginning days of her new normal way of eating, it's almost a sure bet your furry friend will pull out all the stops to try to get you to feed her more. Be ready to practice some tough love. Don't give in. Distract her with a walk, a training session, brushing, a massage or some playtime.

Remember: You're replacing the "love" you were giving her through extra food with the type of love that will help her have a longer, healthier life. Keep reminding yourself that your too-heavy dog won't get her girlish figure back (or her health and longevity) without your commitment to do the right thing for her — even if the road is bumpy at times.

Sources and References

¹ [dvm360, January 31, 2017 \(Archived\)](#).
