

Simple (but Ignored) Way to Add Many Years to Share with Your Devoted Pet

So easy, yet so overlooked — this single strategy could have you basking in your pet's love for many years. That's an astounding 30 months of pleasure. Any way you slice it, you're giving them a new shot at life and you prolonged enjoyment.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- In 2015, 58% of U.S. cats and 54% of U.S. dogs were overweight or obese
- Access to too much food too often (including mealtime and treats), poor-quality food, and inactivity are top culprits driving the obesity epidemic in pets
- Just 1 pound of excess fat on a cat may be similar to 20 pounds on a person
- If you're feeling overwhelmed about your pet's condition, remember that even extremely obese animals can get back to a healthy weight with proper attention to diet and exercise
- There's no doubt that lack of sufficient exercise increases the risk of obesity in your pet and is necessary for healthy weight loss

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If your dog or cat is overweight or obese, he is, unfortunately, in good company. According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP), 58% of U.S. cats and 54% of U.S. dogs were overweight or obese in 2015.¹

Also revealing, 90% of owners were unaware that their pet needed to lose some weight. This is, of course, not a cosmetic issue. Carrying around extra pounds puts stress on pets' joints that increases the risk of arthritis.

Arthritis was the most common obesity-related disease in dogs in 2015, according to pet insurance provider Nationwide.²

Bladder and urinary tract disease were the most common obesity-related diseases in cats, but there were others as well. Diabetes, chronic kidney disease, torn knee ligaments, heart failure, liver disease and high blood pressure are just some examples of obesity-related conditions in dogs and cats.

In order to give your pet the best chance at a long and healthy life, it's imperative to help him maintain a healthy weight. For starters, first learn how to recognize if your pet needs to lose weight.

Signs Your Dog or Cat May Be Overweight

Your veterinarian can tell you for sure whether your dog or cat is a healthy weight, but some telltale signs that your pet may benefit from weight loss include the following:

- He has an oval shape when you look down on him from above
- You cannot feel your pet's ribs
- You cannot feel the bones near the base of your pet's tail (his pelvis)
- You can see excess fat on his abdomen, hips and/or neck

Even being overweight by a relatively small amount adds up fast for pets. For instance, 1 pound of excess fat on a cat may be similar to 20 pounds on a person. Access to too much food (including mealtime and treats), and poor-quality food, are top culprits driving the obesity epidemic in pets.

Add in not enough activity and it's a recipe for weight gain. It's unfortunate, because helping your pet maintain a healthy weight can add years to his life (about 2.5 years compared to an overweight pet).³

Fat Vincent Becomes Skinny Vinnie — A Weight-Loss Success Story

If you're feeling overwhelmed about your pet's condition, remember that even extremely obese animals can get back to a healthy weight with proper attention to diet and exercise.

Take the case of "Fat Vincent," a 7-year-old dachshund that was surrendered to an animal shelter after his owner died, weighing in at 38 pounds.

He was so overweight that his chest and abdomen barely cleared the floor when he was standing.⁴ Vincent was taken in by the K-9 Angels Rescue group struggling with obesity-related health conditions.

He could barely walk and his back was having trouble supporting his extra weight. The risk of nerve damage was high.

By April 2016, about eight months after he was surrendered, Vincent successfully lost more than 20 pounds. He looks like a new dog and has undoubtedly been given another chance at life. He also got a new name, Skinny Vinnie.

Dennis, also a dachshund, has a similar success story to tell. In 2013, he weighed in at 56 pounds, courtesy of a diet based on fast-food burgers and pizza. A nursing student adopted the dog from her relative and helped him trim down to 12 pounds over a 2-year period.⁵

Dachshunds are one of a handful of breeds that are prone to weight gain (Labrador retrievers, Dalmatians, mixed breeds and cocker spaniels are others). However, even with a genetic disposition, your pet can stay slim and trim.

How to Help Your Overweight Pet Lose Weight

Weight loss should be a gradual process, especially for cats. 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.

Next, ditch any low-calorie or "diet" pet foods, most of which are filled with grains and fillers, which is the opposite of what your pet needs for healthy weight loss. It's certainly possible to trigger weight loss in your pet just by cutting down on his caloric intake, but by doing this you're not nourishing your pet properly.

This is the problem with "bulking up" your pet's diet with green beans or another filler food — the nutrients, including vitamin D, manganese, iodine, amino acids, essential fatty acids and zinc, for instance, just aren't there.

Here's a process to follow when transitioning your dog to a healthy, species-appropriate diet that will naturally promote weight loss:

- Wean your dog onto a potato, corn, rice, soy and tapioca-free diet. Ideally, this will mean transitioning your pet to a balanced, fresh homemade diet (that lists the calories of the food you're feeding) so you know every ingredient your pet is eating.
- Calculate kcal requirements for your pet's ideal weight.
- Measure your pet's food portions (using an actual measuring cup) and drastically limit treats (remember treats need to be calculated into calories ingested for the day).

You can also set aside a few tablespoons of homemade food that can be rolled into tiny pea-sized bites and used as treats throughout the day.

- Stimulate your pet's metabolism by shifting the number of meals she's consuming. For instance, if your fat cat is eating three meals a day, feed her ideal calories split into two meals a day instead. If your obese dog eats twice a day, reduce his morning meal to a snack and combine the majority of his calories into one, larger meal at night.
- Stay strong. If your pet is used to eating throughout the day and getting bites of your pizza crust and chips, you can expect him to put the pressure on you to cave once you stop giving in. But stay strong. You're not denying your pet a treat; you're giving him a longer, healthier life.

Daily Exercise Is Essential

Once you've changed your pet's diet, be sure he's also getting regular activity. Skinny Vinnie maintains his trim physique, in part, by swimming for up to 30 minutes daily and also taking long walks of 45 minutes to one hour six days a week.⁶

There's no doubt that lack of sufficient exercise increases the risk of obesity in your pet and is necessary for healthy weight loss. Daily exercise, including at least 20 minutes (but preferably 60 minutes) of consistent aerobic activity, will help your pet burn fat and increase muscle tone.

If you don't have the time to devote to this, enlist the help of someone who does. A dog walker or jogger or a daily boarding service (that makes sure pets are actively playing) are both practical options. If you're creative, you can even get your couch-potato cat up and moving more.

Here's one trick to use before mealtimes: Once you put the food in the bowl, your cat will likely be fixated on what's inside. It's an opportune time to grab the bowl and take a walk around the house — up the stairs, down the stairs, down the hall and back again — with your kitty following suit.

Throw Your Dog a Metabolic Curve Ball

There are occasional cases where a pet may have difficulty losing weight even when eating the right food in the right portions, and despite ample activity. In this case, try throwing your dog a "metabolic curve ball" by changing up the timing of her feeding. Dogs are biologically programmed for regular periods of starvation. In the wild, dogs and their ancestors would have caught a meal and then had a period without food. They would have rarely had regular meals two or three times a day.

Not only may feeding your dog more often than they metabolically need lead to weight gain, but it may also have a negative influence on your dog's immune system in ways we're only beginning to understand.

Time-restricted feeding, or TRF, is one such option that's proven effective for many animals. For dogs, this means allowing a dog's gastrointestinal tract to rest in between meals for 16 to 24 hours (feeding one large meal a day, or two smaller meals six to eight hours apart), which mimics their natural history.

What we're learning is that changing not only what we feed dogs but how and when we feed dogs can substantially alter their **immuno-metabolic health**.

TRF is definitely an approach worth trying if your dog has reached a weight-loss plateau. So in addition to feeding your overweight dog a balanced, fresh-food diet, be sure it's a well-timed diet as well.

Sources and References

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

² [CBS News January 12, 2016](#)

³ [VCA Hospitals, Is My Cat Overweight?](#)

⁴ [CNN April 7, 2016](#)

⁵ [Huffington Post March 13, 2015](#)

⁶ [ABC News April 13, 2016](#)
