



Claws & Paws

VETERINARY HOSPITAL®
A Full Service Veterinary Hospital for Small Animals & Exotics

Helping an Overweight Pet Lose Weight

Over 50% of dogs and cats in the United States are overweight. Overweight pets are at increased risk of several diseases, have a decreased life expectancy, and often experience chronic pain.

Overweight pets are more likely to suffer from:

- Arthritis and degenerative joint disease
- Orthopedic and back problems
- Diabetes
- Difficulty breathing
- Overheating and heat stroke
- Heart problems and high blood pressure
- Pancreatitis
- Skin conditions
- Cancer
- Premature death

If those are not enough reasons for your pet to lose weight, overweight pets often tire more easily and are less playful than if they were at a healthy weight, so your pet may be more fun to play with once he or she loses weight!

How do I tell if my dog or cat is overweight?

The most reliable way to tell if a dog or cat is overweight is with a hands-on examination of three key areas:

1. You should be able to easily feel individual ribs, but you should not be able to see the ribs. There should only be a thin layer of fat between skin and ribs. When you feel your pet's side, it should feel like the back of your hand, not like the fleshy part of your palm (too heavy), and not like your knuckles (too thin).
2. If you look down at your pet from above, behind the ribcage and in front of the hips there should be a narrowing of your pet's sides, similar to the shape of an hourglass. If the contour of the sides is straight or bulges out between the end of the ribcage and the hind legs, your pet is overweight.
3. The abdomen or belly should look "tucked up" when you look at your dog or cat from the side.

Why is my pet overweight?

Some breeds are prone to being overweight, such as Labrador Retrievers, and some are rarely overweight, such as Greyhounds. Regardless of the breed, however, what and how much you feed makes a huge difference. Often, dogs and cats gain weight due to treats, people food, and other "extras" even if they are getting the proper amount of dog or cat food in their bowl every day. Also, eye-balling or estimating an amount of food rather than actually measuring it can cause your pet to gain weight. Ask us for a free measuring cup. Finally, free-choice feeding or just filling the pet's bowl up every day without measuring the amount of food can lead to weight gain. Contrary to popular belief, animals do not instinctively know how much to eat every day.

They will eat extra food if it is available to save up for when food is not available – but we usually feed our pets every day, so the extra energy never gets used. Instead it is stored as fat, resulting in weight gain.

Putting Your Pet On a diet

First, make a list of everything your dog or cat eats every day or even every week, including pet food, treats, table scraps, etc. (We have a form available for you to use at CPVH.com/FitClub) You will need to monitor everything he or she eats in order to have successful weight loss. For example, if you cut back on the amount of dog food in the bowl, but then you are a family member feed a handful of treats, your dog may actually be eating the same or more calories than before. The easiest way for your pet to lose weight is to eliminate all treats, people food, and table scraps. Sometimes cutting out treats is all that is needed for a pet to lose weight.

Commercial dog and cat treats are often high in calories and fat or sugar, like candy bars, which is why they taste so good to our pets. They are not designed to provide complete nutrition, and they are designed to be given in very small amounts (again, like candy bars for people). Ideally, treats should make up less than 5% of the total calories consumed by your pet. If cutting out all treats is unrealistic, you can either give fewer treats or smaller treats, give treats less often, or give healthier treats. You can find lean or healthy commercial treats, or you can try veggies or rice cakes (be sure to check our list of safe and unsafe foods).

Safe Snacks:

- Apples – without seeds or cores
- Blueberries
- Strawberries
- Watermelon – without seeds
- Frozen bananas
- Green beans
- Carrots – raw or cooked
- Sweet potatoes – cooked, cubed or mashed without butter or seasonings
- Regular potatoes – okay in limited amounts (they are high in carbohydrates which can cause weight gain)
- Squash, zucchini
- Lettuce
- Spinich
- Popcorn – without salt or butter
- Cheerios – especially for smaller dogs
- Catnip or cat grass

Avoid Feeding:

- Grapes and raisins – can be toxic to dogs and cats
- Garlic and onions – both have chemical compounds that are toxic and may be fatal to dogs and cats

- Tomatoes
- Avocados
- Mushrooms
- Fruits with pits (cherries, peaches, plums) – some are toxic, some present a choking hazard
- Nuts – especially macadamia nuts, which are toxic to pets
- Chocolate

You can also try a “lighter” dog or cat food that is specially designed for weight loss. Some words to look for on the package are: light, weight management, healthy weight, or less active. There are also prescription diets available through our hospital, which are often even more effective in helping with weight loss. Please ask us if you have any questions about how much or what your pet should be eating. We can help develop a weight loss plan for your pet based on his or her ideal weight, activity level, and overall health. You can also bring your pet in whenever you would like for a quick “weigh-in” to see if the weight loss plan is working.

Don’t give in to begging for treats or food. It may take your pet a little while to get used to the new amount of food she or he is eating, but it is important to stick with your plan, so that you can have a happier, healthier, thinner dog or cat. One thing to keep in mind is that many times when we think our pets want food, they actually want our attention. So try getting out a toy or brush and giving you pet some attention instead of food.

How much should I feed?

In addition to limiting or cutting out treats, you will probably need to change the type or amount of food your pet gets. The recommended amount of food your pet needs will depend on many factors, such as your pet’s age, breed, sex, whether it is spayed or neutered, activity level, weight, and how much weight he or she needs to lose. The amount to feed will also depend on the type and brand of food you choose, since each different kind of food, contains different amounts of nutrients. Try slowly decreasing the amount of food you feed your pet by 25% for 6-8 weeks, and see if your pet begins to lose weight. If you have not been measuring the food, or if you have any questions, talk to one of our doctors about what type of food, how much and how often to feed your pet for optimal weight loss or weight maintenance.

Exercise

Getting more physical activity helps weight loss for pets as well as people. Try taking your dog for more walks, or playing fetch. Be sure to avoid the hottest part of the day if you are going for a long walk or a run. You can also take your dog swimming in a pool or lake. If you are trying to help your cat lose weight, get a fishing pole-type cat toy, some catnip, or a toy your cat like to chase and play with your cat for a few minutes each day. No matter what activity you choose for your cat or dog, start out slow if you pet is older or significantly overweight, and increase the time and intensity of the exercise gradually over time.

How long will it take?

It will take several months or longer for your pet to get to its goal weight. Ideally, your pet should be losing about 1-2% of his or her starting weight per week. For a large dog, this may mean aiming to lose one pound per week, whereas for a cat or small dog, you should aim for them to lose one pound a month. Monitor their weight at least once a month, controlling food portions, limiting treats, and providing exercise so that they will maintain their healthier weight.

If your pet is not losing weight, and you have cut out treats, decreased the amount of food, and increased your pet's physical activity, don't hesitate to contact your veterinarian. There are hormone disorders (such as low thyroid and Cushing's disease) that can cause weight gain, and we can check for these conditions with blood tests.