

Feeding and Weight Management

This is a thorny issue for not only our pets but us too. There is a trend towards weight increase and obesity in the human population and this trend is being mirrored in our pet populations too. Dogs, cats and rabbits are all struggling with too much food on offer and often not enough exercise. We often find it difficult to control our own intake of food and similarly find it hard to limit what we give our pets. We however, are the ones in total control of the food cupboard and weekly shop and dogs and cats and rabbits can generally only eat what they have been given. Were pets are becoming obese their health and welfare is compromised and as a pet owner and as a vet we must do all we can to guard our pets health and well-being.

Hidden problem

Many people don't realise that their pet is overweight. This is a big hurdle to get over as unless you recognize that there is a problem you are unlikely to try and tackle it.

Weight issues tend to creep up on you and because weight builds slowly it is easy not to notice. Rabbits can be the most unfortunate of obese pets. They are often hidden away in hutches not viewed by other people. Some get very little exercise and rabbit owners are often advised to feed their pets lots of dry 'rabbit mix' and these pets can get seriously obese without the owner ever realising there is an issue.

- Try and be objective and look at your pets shape and size. We all see lots of other pets and it is good to compare.
- Listen to what friends, family and passing dog walkers who see your pet say to you.
- Finally, ask us. We will always offer an opinion (sometimes unasked for!) about your pet's weight. We will be happy to call in and weigh your pet and look at its overall condition and let you know what we think.

If your pet is overweight then the next step is to do something about it.

Natural feeding habits

Cats are natural hunters. The cat family tend to hunt and kill prey and eat their fill and then rest and digest slowly until they are hungry enough to go off and repeat the whole process. They are NOT nibblers of food who visit the feeding grounds little and often. They push back their Sunday carcass and need a serious rest before they look to feed again. Were weight is an issue we often find that food is on offer little and often or even left down in the form of munchies or dry food and cats are free to visit and pick from the bowl for long periods of the day. This can be a recipe for disaster.

Dogs are hunters and scavengers. They can be always on the look out for food as in the wild they often don't know where their next meal is going to come from. Again, leaving food down for them to help themselves can often lead to steady weight increase.

Rabbits are however different. Rabbits are herbivores and just like sheep and cows and horses their digestive systems are designed to be eating all day. All everyone ever sees a sheep doing in a field is munching grass (or occasionally sleeping) for endless hours of the day and night. This is because they eat high roughage, low energy food in the form of grass. This needs chewing and grinding and lots of digesting. Rabbits should have constant access to grass or hay (dead grass) and vegetables to chew on and keep them occupied and keep their teeth healthy. People often feed their rabbits dry rabbit pellets or rabbit mix. This should be used as a supplement or treat and NEVER given in large quantities. This is carbohydrate rich feeding stuff and even the best pelleted ration contains much more energy than grass. Rabbits can take in far too much of this food and over a period can become seriously obese.

There are family pets that don't fit into these patterns. There are pets who have a constantly topped up food bowl always down in the kitchen and there are some who have a set amount put down every day and that 'total for the day' is left in the bowl to be nibbled at when the dog or cat wants. If this dog or cat is the correct weight and doesn't over eat and just picks exactly what it needs (and SOME pets are very good at doing this) then if that is how it suits you to feed them then please carry on.

Please beware however as your pet may start off the correct weight and gradually slide into growing to be overweight so gradually that you don't see it

Fussy eaters and how to help them

Some pets are not food motivated at all. We see many dogs who are very picky eaters and these never finish a meal and often just take a little of what you offer them. These pets (often dogs) are just not food orientated. Leaving food down permanently for these dogs to 'encourage' them to eat is actually teaching them to be pickier. They are 'taught' that it is ok to have the odd mouthful here and there and food will always be available and there is no need to worry.

Instead these pets should be offered food 2-3 times a day in small meals but if they turn their nose up or only eat a fraction of what you offer then the rest should be taken away and the pet not offered more till the next meal time. Worse still some of these dogs are 'encouraged' to eat by adding tasty meat to their diets and offered tit bits and nicer things to eat because the owner worries about their lack of intake of food. This can over ride their natural picky appetite and can turn a slim, fit fussy eater into an overweight pet.

There is nothing wrong with being a picky, fussy eater. The doctor's surgery sees a steady trickle of worried parents dragging their perfectly healthy toddlers to the doctor because "he barely seems to eat enough to survive".

We see the same issue with pets, especially dogs, with people worrying that they don't eat enough.

No healthy toddler or pet ever refuses food and wastes away! If your pet is a healthy weight and just chooses not to eat much then do not try and override this wonderful situation. Spend all the money your pet saves you on things for yourself and enjoy having a trim, fit pet. If you think your pet is underweight then that is a different issue and if your pet never seems to eat much and is underweight then there may be a health issue and please ask us to look at him and we will tell you if there is a health problem causing a poor appetite. Most don't have.

One of each

Having one overweight pet and one thin or normal weight pet is a common difficulty for pet owners. Also they sometimes have one greedy overweight pet and another that may be old or frail and needs food little and often. You need to treat these two very differently and you can't simply say well I need to leave food down all the time for the old frail one and I can't stop the greedy one getting to it. Set meals for the overweight one and close the door on him and at other times of the day take time to offer food to the pet that does need to eat more often.

People often complain to us that "it's impossible with these two. As soon as he finishes his food he runs over and pushes the other one out of the way and finishes theirs" or "the poor old boy eats really slowly and never gets to finish as the greedy one hovers all his up and then rushes over and takes over the second bowl too".

Doors were invented to deal with just this problem!

It is impossible to feed one pet an extra meal in front of another pet and expect them not to be unhappy (and you to feel 'cruel').

Get someone to play with the overweight pet (or take them out for a 10 minute walk!) while you devote attention and time to your second pet. What the first one doesn't know about, it can't miss!

Health problems resulting from obesity

Obesity leads to a worsening of some of the most common old age health issues that face our pets:

- Arthritis
- Heart disease
- Chronic bronchitis and respiratory diseases

These are all made much, much worse when pets carry too much weight. It can in many cases lead to shortening of their lives and a poorer quality of life while they are alive.

Obesity can make your pet more prone to certain serious health issues

- Diabetes – a serious disease that in dogs and cats that usually requires you to give them lifelong insulin injections.
- Pancreatitis – a sometimes life threatening disease that can cause vomiting, severe illness and in the long term diabetes.
- Arthritis - excessive strain on joints over many years makes arthritis more likely and also makes it worse when it does appear
- Liver diseases - cats especially are prone to certain life threatening liver diseases when they are obese
- Chronic Diarrhoea - rabbits fed to excess very often get chronic intestinal problems and faecal soiling round their bottoms. This dirty, smelly problem can make them more likely to get 'fly strike' where flies lay their eggs on rabbits mucky rear ends and these hatch into maggots that attack the rabbit. This can sometimes have a fatal outcome.

Causes of obesity

- Overfeeding
- Giving food as an expression of love and affection.
- Lack of exercise
- Overriding a naturally small appetite in some dogs by offering too much food too frequently or tempting with 'nice' things.
- Competition. Again, some pets have naturally picky appetites but eat more because there is another pet in the same room or next to them. Give pets 'room' to eat at their own pace and in their own space.
- Encouraging overeating. If your pet doesn't want all his food or walks away and leaves some. Take the food away – he has had enough. Don't call him back or leave it for him to snack on later.
- Leaving other pets food down. Lots of people with cats and dogs may give their dogs set meals but leave down cat food that the dogs pinch when they can. Food should not be left down for cats all the time but if you need to then lift food off the floor and put it somewhere where the dogs can't get at it.
- Scavenging. If your pet raids the bins or gets up to the work surfaces then either train your dog not to or don't leave things out or bins where they can be got at.
- Feeding when pets need attention. If your cat pesters you and meows and bothers because it wants feeding and it is not its meal time then don't give in and feed it. Find something else to do with it.

Play with it, groom it or even put it out. If every time a cat pesters you put it outside then it will learn not to pester you!

- Being fed elsewhere. You can't control what your cat gets from a neighbour (unless you ask them not to put food down). You can fully control what it gets in your house though. If it is being well fed elsewhere then don't give it a full quota of food at home. Some pets are regularly looked after by other people and can be spoilt. Again, ask them not to but if they don't listen and you know your dog has been well fed already then don't feed it again when it gets home. Miss food out that day and let your dog just get what it gets at 'Granny's'
- Neutering. Neutering your pet can make them more liable to gain weight. Reduce food intake when your pet is neutered – especially if it is already slightly heavy. Reweigh your pet regularly for the 3-9 months after it has been neutered and adjust food intake accordingly.

Food always in the bowl?

We see 2 common situations:

1. There is always a food bowl down with food in it. As discussed before, these pets are often fussy eaters and often started life very fit and slim. We wanted them to eat more and leaving food down like this has 'tempted' them to eat more than they naturally would have. They gradually get too heavy. If these pets start as bigger eaters then they are usually obese at this stage and often have got so big that their initially healthy appetites are permanently blunted by the constant access to food.
2. People believe that they only feed their pet once or twice a day but the pet never finishes its food so there is always some left in the bowl. This pet is feeding itself all day or all night and is certainly not on 1 or 2 meals a day. You may put it down once or twice but he is feeding over long stretches, picking whenever he wants till the bowl is eventually empty. Sometimes this never happens. Sometimes when you come to refill it there is still a bit of the previous meal left. These pets are on a 24 hour feeding regime. Their owners will still tell us, when asked how often they feed their pet, "he only gets fed twice a day". **Food should never be left in the bowl**

I hate my pet being hungry!

Weight gain is an insidious problem and as it creeps up on our pets they learn to cope with carrying more weight and we get used to them looking that way and being less fit. When we work with you to transform an

overweight pet into a trimmer and fitter pet we always see a happier pet. They may be hungrier but they are always happier.

Being hungry at various times of the day is a natural state to be in. When I get home for my tea after a long day at work I can be seriously hungry. This is not because my wife has been cruel to me. This is because I haven't eaten for a few hours and will now eat 2 or three course of food and sit back happy and content at the end of it. I will be hungry again the next morning and will enjoy my breakfast and so on in a happy natural cycle,

I can override this by munching in the car between calls and having biscuits with my tea and my waist line will slowly widen as the years go by. If someone totally over rode that situation and went on all my calls with me and sat in the passenger seat and every time I said "when is teatime? I am a bit peckish" they gave me a pack of crisps, a pasty, a chocolate or a banana and suddenly I was eating 10 snacks a day then a) I would never get truly hungry and when my wife gave me my 2 coarse evening meal I wouldn't finish it and b) my waistline wouldn't have gently expanded, I would be obese!

Letting your pet get hungry and your dog sat in the kitchen drooling as you open a tin of food is a natural and happy situation. Never feel that you are being cruel by making your pet wait for its tea and breakfast. 2 or 3 meals a day at set times is all they need. Pets love routines. We eat set meals. We have breakfast, lunch and supper and if we stick to these with ourselves and our pets then weight problem would be lessened. There is nothing wrong with 2 or 3 square meals it is all the extra stuff that come along between meals that causes the problem.

Dealing with Overweight Dogs

Dogs are easy. Give them plenty of exercise and feed them 2 meals a day with an occasional treat and you will have a healthy happy dog.

If your pet doesn't get enough exercise then give it more. Re-weigh and review.

If your pet gets too many treats then reduce these. Dogs want a treat. They will be just as happy and will feel just as loved by the owner that gives them a quarter of a beef strip as the owner that gives them 2 beef strips. Dogs that get a biscuit last thing at night before going to bed will be just as happy as the dog that gets 4 biscuits just before bed! Feeding too many tit bits is a human problem that becomes a dog problem.

Some chews and treats are better than others. Rawhide chews are good for teeth and contain far fewer calories than 'Dentastix' or jerky type chews.

If your pet is on ad lib food when ever it wants it then stop this immediately and feed 2 or 3 times a day at set regular meal times. Take anything away that he leaves at the end of the meal. Re-weigh and review.

Still not losing? Then reduce the size of each meal. Reweigh and review.

Still not losing? Then reduce from 3 to 2 meals or from 2 to 1 meal. Reweigh and review.

Still not losing? Then you need to feed lower calorie food. Get 'light' varieties rather than 'full fat' food. Most brands of food have a 'light' type for overweight or less active dogs. Move off dry food and try tinned. Try home cooked food. Try a whole new diet such as the 'raw meaty bones diet' (see below)

If still not losing then we need to get involved. We will review how and what you feed your dog. We will review how you exercise your dog. We will ensure that there isn't a medical reason for your pet being overweight or not losing weight. We can offer lower calorie foods that you can buy at pet shops or supermarkets. We can ever offer you 'diet medicine'. We can support and motivate you and weigh your pet regularly

Slimming medicines are available for dogs. They are along the same lines as human slimming pills / drugs. We tend to only use them for an initial period and were we really need to see a rapid change in weight e.g. in critically ill patients or those awaiting surgery.

Sometimes an initial weight gain can really open your eyes to what your pet will feel like and how happier it will be when it is slimmer. This can be a huge motivating factor for you and can be another indication for short term initial medications.

In the vast majority of dogs we diet them by use of increased exercise and reduced food, this is the natural and best way to lose weight.

Dealing with Overweight Cats

If your pet is on adlib food whenever it wants it then stop this immediately and feed 2 or 3 times a day at set regular meal times. Take anything away that he leaves at the end of the meal. Reweigh and review.

Still not losing?| Then reduce the size of each meal.

Try feeding wet food instead of dry munchies. Dry food is more convenient (but usually more convenient as people want to leave it out in the bowl all day). If you are on set meals only then wet food is just as convenient. Try feeding raw or natural diets that can take longer to eat and be less calorific. Try feeding 'light' varieties of your cat's normal brand of food.

Don't give milk or cat milk too often. These contain calories and offering cats fresh water is all they require to drink. Drink fountains can encourage cats to drink as they seem to prefer running water.

We can offer you're a low calorie weight reducing diet (wet or dry) that is much lower in calories than most 'light' diets. Please ask us if you need help.

Making cats exercise more is very difficult and 'couch potatoes' are difficult to make more active. Play can help them to move around. Feeding off the ground forces them to jump up for food. Make them go up and down stairs for their food. Throw their quota of dry food out on to the lawn and let them 'graze' around to find it. Hiding food in 'treat balls' can make them play and chase.

Raw food diets

There are an increasing number of people who choose to feed raw or natural food to their pets.

Most cats and dogs eat their 'processed' dry or tinned food quite quickly. Raw food takes much longer to eat and is much more interesting for pets. Feeding time is a huge part of their day and if this takes longer and is more stimulating then that can only add to the pleasure.

Raw food makes their teeth work harder and can help to keep better oral hygiene.

Some people believe that natural food is better for some allergies and stomach problems (like chronic loose stools).

Feeding raw food and bones (as long as food is stored properly)) does not carry any health risks.

Cooked bones should not be fed to pets as they can sometimes splinter and cause blockages and problems. Raw bones however, are great for pets' teeth and interest.

Look up 'Raw Meaty Bones' on the web for much more information ([link on our web site](#)).

Dealing with Overweight Rabbits

Essentially rabbits were made to eat a diet composed mainly of grass and other wild greens. The majority of your pet's food should be in the form of grass (when available), fresh greens and good quality hay. Hay is particularly important as it is an all year round, essential part of his diet. Choose good quality hay (Timothy Hay is the best) and make sure it is clean and free from dust or mould. Ideally this should be offered in some sort of rack to keep it raised off the floor of the hutch.

Most rabbits are fed some sort of pelleted 'concentrate' food. This is a balanced mix of ingredients and should be fed in small quantities as a supplement to the roughage we have discussed. Overfeeding of such rabbit mixes is the commonest cause of digestive upsets and diarrhoea. In addition overfeeding can quickly lead to excessive weight gain.

A small amount (1 tablespoon for a dwarf rabbit and 2 for a larger breed would be maximum amounts) in a bowl twice a day is all that is required. If it is not all eaten, then what is left over should be removed – ***rabbit mix should never be left in the bowl all day for a rabbit*** to feed on when it gets bored or fancies a nibble. This is when it should be eating roughage. Many people complain that their rabbit won't eat hay. This is almost always because they have too much other food – especially rabbit mix – on offer and they are choosing the 'easy option', but that is not the best option!

Rabbits' teeth grow continually through their lives and they rely on plenty of roughage to keep their teeth worn down. Unsuitable diets and feeding too much concentrate is the most common cause of bone and dental disease in pet rabbits.

A selection of greens from the kitchen (lettuce, cabbage, salad leaves etc.), vegetables (broccoli, carrots etc.), fresh herbs (chives, basil, coriander etc.), flowers (for example roses and nasturtiums) and small amounts of fruit (for example apples and banana) can be offered too. Some root vegetables (e.g. parsnip, swede) are ok but not too much as they are very starchy. Try to offer a variety rather than too much of any one particular sort. A good handful twice a day should be enough.

- Think of what a rabbit eats in the wild – that is the best and healthiest diet for your pet rabbit.
- 70 % of your rabbits diet should be roughage in the form of hay or grass
- 25 % or more should be greens, vegetables, herbs, flowers and fruit.
- Less than 5 % should be dry 'rabbit food' mix that you feed in a bowl.

- If you need to make changes then don't change everything overnight as this might upset your pet's digestion. Make changes gradually over a week or two and your pet will easily adapt to its new, improved diet.

Take home messages

- Fit pets are happy pets
- Feed your pet to be its ideal weight and let it live its life to its full potential
- If you are not sure whether your pet is overweight then call us and we will tell you whether to worry or not and we can help with the solution. Dieting and losing weight although 'not rocket science' can be a lot easier with guidance and support. 'Weight Watchers' didn't become an international support organization because people find it easy to diet!
- We are here to help
- Weighing pet's at home is not always easy. Seeing those small but regular losses of weight help hugely with motivation and just looking at your pet is not any easy way to gauge success or failure. We are always happy to get involved with your pets weight loss program. Call if you would like help.
- When a person or a pet first goes on a diet and they are eating less than they used to their body and brain tells them that something has changed. Once things settle down and your pet is used to the new regime they will be fine. Initially however, they will pester for food (especially cats) and want to keep their old feeding habits. This is a short but tricky period to get through. Perseverance will be rewarded with a trimmer and healthier pet in the long term.
- Be prepared and come up with strategies to divert your pet when they pester rather than allowing them to meow or pester till you finally give in because you can't take any more.