

## 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 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 wellbeing.

### 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.

### 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

- Arthritis - excessive strain on joints over many years makes arthritis more likely and also makes it worse when it does appear
- 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 rabbits 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.
- Feeding when pets need attention. If your pet rabbit pesters you and bothers because it wants feeding and it is not its meal time then don't give in and feed it.
- 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.

## Natural feeding habits.

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.

## 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 hoovers 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!

## 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".

**Ad lib dry food should never be left in the bowl all day long**

## 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 course 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 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! Rabbit's 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.