

Your Pet and Weight Loss



Does your pet waddle when he walks or have a bulging belly that sways from side to side? Are her ribs buried under so many wobbles that you can't feel them when you stroke her? Puffs and pants when you head out for a walk? Then, chances are you have an overweight or obese pet.

What's the problem?

What we call 'fat' is medically referred to as 'White Adipose Tissue'. Until recently (10 years ago), we thought fat just stored excess energy and having too much was just 'excess baggage' that made you 'big' and put pressure on joints. But there's a lot more to it than that: we now know that fat plays an enormous role in the body as a producer of hormones (good and bad) and inflammatory agents; excess fat can also lead to raised blood pressure.

There are many reasons for pets being overweight, including breed, ageing, slowing metabolism, hormonal disorders and medication side effects but, in most instances, weight problems are the result of two simple, all-too-common factors: too much food and not enough exercise. Many rescued/adopted animals become very overweight, especially if they were neglected. This is because the animal is used to eating anything it encounters as it doesn't know where its next meal is coming from, as well as because adopters often feel sorry for them and end up overfeeding. Or the animal is already overweight when you adopt because shelter staff usually don't have time to play with and walk animals as much as is needed.

But it's just a kilo or two... For your pet, that's a good portion of their total body weight – and it's noticeable. But it's their health, not their looks, that concerns me. Many diseases are associated with being overweight – plus it can be uncomfortable. In short, having excessive body fat stores is a marker for a shorter and healthier life.

58 *Happy Tails March/April 2016*

Written by Lorren Barham – Animal Hydrotherapist and owner of Pet Wellness Worx

Sometimes owners mistakenly believe that our pets need 24-hour access to food ('free-feeding'), or we don't even realise we're overfilling their bowls. Oh, and those puppy-dog eyes when there's a snack to be had! We give in so easily... Dogs or cats today are generally confined indoors or in yards and we often just don't have enough time to walk the dogs and do homework, clean, cook, etc.; they don't get the exercise they need. And no, dogs will not 'automatically' exercise any more than humans will (they're just as lazy as we are). Fence-running and playing aren't enough.

How do you know if your dog or cat is overweight? The general rule of thumb is that you should be able to feel the ribs, although they shouldn't stick out, and their 'waistline' should be defined. However, each and every animal is different (e.g. a Basset Hound won't ever have a waspy waist like a Whippet), so you should consult with your vet, who can weigh, measure and take your pet's age, build, breed and health into consideration.

When is fat bad?

Overweightness is an excess of body fat which could lead to disease; obesity is severe overweight. In humans, obesity is defined as being 20% overweight; for pets it's more or less the same, depending on species and breed. The prevalence of overweightness in dogs and cats ranges between 25-40% in the USA, increasing in the five- to 10-year age group ('middle-age spread'); South African pets – especially suburban animals – are likely not far behind. A recent US study found that veterinarians considered 47% of their patients to be overweight, yet only 17% of the owners agreed... In fact, allowing one's pet to become severely obese is considered to be animal cruelty.

The bottom line is that lean pets generally live longer, healthier lives than overweight ones. A 14-year study showed that dogs fed 25% fewer calories than their free-fed littermates lived nearly two years longer and showed fewer visible signs of ageing; they were also a full three years older before they needed treatment for arthritis.

So, why is being overweight bad?

Chronic diseases in cats and dogs have risen dramatically over the last five to ten years – and being overweight is linked to many of them. The main problems associated with overweight/obesity are the pressure on joints and vertebrae, causing (or accelerating) joint surface deterioration and eventually leading to osteoarthritis, disc disease, ruptured cruciate ligaments and exacerbation of hip dysplasia, to name but a few. Furthermore, large amounts of fat in the abdominal and thoracic cavities lead to internal organs being squashed and their function limited. Fat tissue releases inflammatory mediators that initiate and drive chronic low-grade inflammation throughout the body, leading to various diseases.

Chronic airway disease in dogs; diabetes and insulin resistance; increased susceptibility to heat stress (fat insulates); greater risk of surgical complications; liver damage; inability to groom in cats, leading to skin disease; increased chance of injury when playing, jumping or running; dermatitis; oral disease and even certain cancers are linked to being chronically overweight or obese. Not to mention the sheer discomfort and reduced mobility involved.

In a nutshell, the effects on quality of life are huge.

Shake it off

So let's get an exercise plan to suit you and your pet, aimed at losing weight, promoting activity, minimising the effects of inactivity, regaining functional movement, speeding up rehabilitation and correcting inefficiency. But where

to begin? Consulting an expert is best – and certainly a vet check-up is recommended. Various factors need to be taken into consideration, including your pet's age, their level of fitness and overweight/obesity, their health (orthopaedic disorders or other medical issues), what they actually enjoy doing, and the time you have available. Your pet may also need pain management for conditions like arthritis to encourage them to move more.

We need to design the appropriate programme for balanced exercise, which may include breed-specific exercises (for example, a low-slung Dachshund and a tall Labrador won't always be able to do the same exercises). The plan should be three-fold, covering core strengthening work, cardiovascular training, and endurance. Core strength acts like a corset, encircling the trunk and protecting the back and spine, and it provides strength and coordination. Cardio strengthens the heart and lungs, and can include land and/or water treadmill, swimming, walks, runs, stairs, and hikes. Long-term endurance training is important to regulate rapid heart rate, strengthen muscles, and improve heart strength. Cats often benefit from a large, multi-level scratch post/climbing frame, and plenty of toys.

Aside from simple at-home measures such as adjusting their food and increasing exercise by taking your pooch for more walks, getting them into your swimming pool, and throwing a ball for them every day, or playing with your cat, various modalities can assist, particularly if your pet has 'special needs'.

Underwater treadmill: Particularly useful for elderly, obese, weak, or unfit animals (cats or dogs), those which have had injuries, and in cases of paralysis. The hydrostatic pressure of the water promotes circulation and the resistance strengthens muscles. Interestingly, the water level makes a difference. Lower water is the better for proprioception (balance) stimulation and neural function because the pet must lift its limbs out of the water and break the surface tension when stepping; higher water

equals more resistance, buoyancy and support, which makes it ideal for creating stability and instilling the confidence to walk without hurting themselves further. When water is at the hip/shoulder level, impact and pressure on joints are limited so your pet can move comfortably, making use of its muscles and joints in a way that would not be possible on land.

Physiotherapy: To assess and treat neuromuscular-skeletal disease much the same as human physios. Various techniques can increase function and mobility of joints and muscles; these include massage, ultrasound/light therapy/TENS, passive range of motion, balance and strengthening exercises.

Acupuncture and Tui na massage: Encourages natural healing, improves functioning and helps with pain modulation. Improves posture by decreasing pain and muscle spasms.

Tellington TTouch™ (TTouch™): A system of gentle bodywork and movement exercises which positively influence behaviour and well-being – you can even do it yourself at home.

The key is to be cautious of overtraining and be prepared to have patience. It will take up to six months to a year to see optimal change – and the more gradual the weight loss programme, the healthier they will be. Better health and well-being equals a happy pooch or kitty. They're worth it. ❤️

Pet Wellness Worx offers hydrotherapy, TTouch™, Reiki, physiotherapy, and acupuncture. For more information, contact Pet Wellness Worx on 021 558 5092 or 083 704 6804, email info@petwellnessworx.co.za or visit www.petwellnessworx.co.za



MIDZANANDA ANIMAL CLINIC KHAYELITSHA



Enhancing well-being for animals and their community through veterinary services, education and partnerships



The Midzananda Animal Clinic is a permanent, veterinary council registered, NPO animal clinic in Khayelitsha, Cape Town.

The clinic serves up to 1000 animals per month through consultations, surgery, mobile clinics, an ambulance, continuous sterilisations and rehoming of pets.

Our focus is community empowerment and education - a community that loves animals is a healthy community.

www.midzananda.co.za

Standard Bank Rondebosch
Account: 075595710 | Branch Code: 025009
www.midzananda.co.za
info@midzananda.co.za | 082 251 0554