Excessive Weight in Dogs and Cats

Obesity is a nutritional disease which is defined by an excess of body fat. Dogs and cats that are over nourished, lack the ability to exercise, or that have a tendency to retain weight are the most at risk for becoming obese. Obesity can result in serious adverse health effects, such as reducing the lifespan, even if your dog/cat is only moderately obese. Multiple areas of the body are affected by excess body fat, including the bones and joints, the digestive organs, and the organs responsible for breathing capacity.

Obesity is common in dogs/cats of all ages, but it usually occurs in middle-aged pets, and generally in those that are between the ages of 5 and 10. Neutered and indoor dogs/cats also tend to have a higher risk of becoming obese.

Symptoms

- Weight gain
- Excess body fat
- The inability (or unwillingness) to exercise
- An above-ideal score in a body condition assessment

Causes

There are several causes of obesity. It is most commonly caused by an imbalance between the energy intake and its usage - eating more than the pet can possibly expend. Certain breeds are predisposed to obesity and one should research their future pet acquisition more carefully in order to try and avoid it. Obesity also becomes more common in old age because of the normal decrease in a pet's ability to exercise. Unhealthy eating habits, such as high-calorie foods, an alternating diet, and frequent treats can also bring on this condition.

Other common causes include:

- Hypothyroidism (too little thyroid hormone production)
- Insulinoma (tumour of the pancreas that is derived from beta cells and secretes insulin)
- Hyperadrenocorticism (excess cortisol – stress hormone - production)
- Neutering (sterilization)

Diagnosis

Obesity is diagnosed primarily by measuring the pet's body weight or by scoring its body condition, which involves assessing its body composition. Your veterinarian will do this by examining your dog, palpating its ribs, lumbar area, tail, and head. The results are then compared to the breed standard.

If a pet is obese, it will have an excess body weight of approximately 10 to 15 percent. In the nine-point scoring system, pets which have a body condition score greater than seven are considered to be obese.

Treatment

Treatment for obesity is focused on weight loss and maintaining a decreased body weight for the long term. This is accomplished by reducing caloric intake and increasing your pet's time spent exercising. Your veterinarian will most likely have a prepared diet plan that you can use to refigure your pet's eating schedule, or will help you to create a long-term diet plan for

your beloved dog/cat. Most practices offer weight loss clinics as part of their normal service to you, which include educational seminars, free visits to the practice, regular weigh-ins and nutritional advice.

Diets that are rich in dietary protein and fibre, but low in fat, are typically recommended, since dietary protein stimulates metabolism and energy expenditure, along with giving the feeling of fullness, so that your pet will not feel hungry again shortly after eating. Dietary fibre, on the other hand, contains little energy but stimulates intestinal metabolism and energy use at the same time.

Increasing your pet's physical activity level is vital for successful treatment. The most common suggestions for dogs are leash walking for at least 15 minutes, twice a day, and playing games such as fetch (tennis ball, toy, frisbee, etc.). Cats may enjoy different games/activities – climbing, chasing or playing with suspended toys/feathers/etc.

Living and Management

The follow-up treatment for obesity includes communicating regularly with your veterinarian about the weight reduction program, monthly monitoring of your pet's weight, and establishing a life-time weight maintenance program once your pet's ideal body condition score has been achieved. With a firm commitment to your pet's health and weight, you will feel confident that your dog/cat is eating healthy and feeling its best.