

How to Effectively Induce Weight Loss in a Dog or Cat

BACKGROUND

Obesity is a serious problem in the modern pet population. Just as in people, obesity can lead to and worsen diseases such as diabetes, arthritis, and respiratory disease. It can also contribute to tearing of the cruciate ligaments in the hindlegs, as well as trigger back pain and spinal disease in small breed dogs. It is imperative to help an overweight pet lose weight in a safe, effective manner. Leaner pets live an average of 1.8 years longer than those that are overweight and may also have delayed onset of the diseases mentioned above.

Because weight loss is not “just a number” but rather individualized for each pet, a numerical system for tracking body condition (degree of leanness or overweight) is important, and you should feel comfortable assessing your pet’s body condition. The ideal body condition is a 5 (out of 9). Pets with a body condition of 5 have a slim but well-fleshed body contour in which a waist line can be visualized and the ribs can be felt. The hips and spine are not protruding but can easily be seen. Many people feel these pets are too skinny when, in fact, they are an excellent weight. Society has come to accept obese animals, and we must retrain ourselves to understand that more food and more weight are not real testimonies of affection and caring in the long run. Pets that have a body condition of 8 or 9 are obese; they do not have visible ribs, hips, or a spine that can be seen or felt through the body fat, and have a large abdomen. This is the situation to be treated and improved with gradual weight loss.

Pets must utilize a combination of techniques to lose weight. Nutrition intake, activity levels, and pet health must all be considered when developing a weight-loss program for pets. Your veterinarian can perform lab tests (typically from blood and urine samples) to assess for any concurrent illness or organ dysfunction that might interfere with weight loss.

GETTING STARTED

The most important subject to be addressed is nutrition. Your pet’s energy intake (caloric intake) should be monitored. Remember, dogs and cats in general only need 300 to 500 kcal per day. Every calorie a pet ingests should be counted.

Every pet food has a different amount of calories per cup; therefore, when changing foods, you must read the bag for recommended feeding amounts. An overweight-management food is recommended and is available from every major pet food manufacturer. These foods have been tested to ensure that the recommended amount of food will meet your pet’s requirements. Some foods may be higher in fiber to aid in weight loss, while others will be higher in protein. If your pet does not respond well to one type of food, you may have better success with another.

Ideally, an overweight or obese pet’s activity level should increase. This can be challenging with dogs that also have other medical disorders such as heart disease or arthritis, and is virtually impossible in any substantial way with cats. However, taking dogs on brief leash-walks at least once a day, slowly increasing the distance over a period of weeks, can be very helpful. Dogs and cats also enjoy retrieving balls, sticks, or play mice. Using toys to increase your pet’s activity level is a good idea; however, be sure that whichever toys you choose are safe for your pet and not small enough for him/her to ingest.

Successful weight loss takes time. Perhaps the greatest predictor of successful weight loss is endurance on the family’s part.

Pets should only lose a maximum of 10% of their body weight per month. This is a small amount compared to what humans can lose. For example, a 20-pound (9 kg) dog should only lose 2 pounds (900 grams) per month.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

The entire family must be on board when starting a weight-loss program. Treats must be monitored and strictly limited. Often, pets are obese just as much from the treats they are eating as from their actual food. Any extra calories the pet receives can be detrimental to the weight-loss program.

If a pet begins to limp, is unable to get up after walks, or becomes extremely inactive, please contact your veterinarian. These could be signs of excessive physical activity and/or morbid obesity.

PROCEDURE

Begin by determining, with your veterinarian, what an ideal lean body weight is for your pet (target weight) and what a realistic time frame is for decreasing the weight to this level. Then mathematically, you and/or your veterinarian can calculate how much food to feed if providing slightly fewer calories per day than the body uses, causing the metabolism to switch to consumption of excess fat as fuel. The typical time frame is 3 to 6 months to restore normal body weight.

Weigh your pet at least once a month to ensure weight loss. If your pet is not losing weight with your current methods, then some changes need to be implemented. This may include diet and/or exercise methods.

- Keep a food diary of the food your pet eats. Include all treats the pet receives and the number of cups fed per day. Calculate the total number of calories and determine if this is 10% less than the recommended baseline caloric intake for an animal of the age and size of your pet. Treats may have to be decreased or substituted; elimination of treats is ideal but rarely acceptable to the family, so substitution is an option. Alternative treats with few calories include baby carrots (fresh), pieces of apple, wedges/quarters of plain rice cakes, cubes of cooked squash, and individual Cheerios. These can give a dog the impression that he/she is eating something offered by hand (so it is a treat) without the richness and caloric bulk of commercially processed treats or table food. Many dogs love vegetables such as green beans, squash, or broccoli and think they are getting a special treat when they receive this kind of human food.
- Measure the food. Free-fed pets will likely gain weight. When dishing out portions of food measured in cups, make sure your measuring cup is an 8-ounce (250-mL) cup, not a large disposable beverage cup.
- Instead of showing your pet love by feeding them, show them love with attention. Some of the greatest success stories about healthy pets that have reached a lean body weight also involve a greater bond as a result of the process.
- Make pets work for their food.
 - Dogs: Hollow, thick rubber (Kong) toys can be excellent distracters. Place kibbled dog food inside the Kong toy and they must push the toy around for the kibble to drop out.
 - Cats: Place food bowls in different parts of the house; this makes the cat go from place to place to eat.

- Feed pets half the daily portion twice daily. Doing so can help keep blood sugar levels more stable and can decrease begging behavior.

Therapeutic diets are available from your veterinarian if the diet you are feeding is not providing results. These are diets that are flavorful but energy/calorie-restricted. Veterinarians should evaluate your pet prior to dispensing these foods.

AFTERWARDS

Once your pet has lost weight, be sure to keep the lean body condition you worked so hard to reach. You will now know how

much your pet can eat and still feel well; be sure to stay within that range, including treats.

Maintain the activity level you have reached. Many dogs enjoy running, jumping, and playing, and many cats enjoy climbing and chasing; these activities, when encouraged, can help them stay trim.

Older pets are at higher risk for arthritis, just as people are. Your veterinarian can provide medication to relieve the symptoms associated with this condition if it occurs, so physical activity can still take place comfortably.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do I know when my pet is overweight?

Learn how to evaluate your pet's weight using the scale described above; this can give you a clear indication if your pet needs to lose weight. Remember, you should be able to easily feel the ribs.

What if my pet doesn't like diet food?

Pet foods are made to be delicious, but just like humans who are dieting, pets may not like a diet food. If your pet does not eat one type of food, try another. Pets need to eat; it is unhealthy to lose weight because of not eating. Pets should feel full from their food and not have to beg.

How often should I change my pet's food?

Changing pet foods should be avoided if possible. If a pet is eating the food well, remain on the food for 1 month before evaluating for weight loss. If the pet is not eating, then it is advised to change the food.

When I change foods, my pet gets diarrhea. What can I do?

It is common for pets to have loose stool or diarrhea when the food has been changed. It is advised to change the diet over a 7-day period, gradually. Ideally, owners should replace small amounts of the old food with the new food each day until day 7, when the new food is completely being offered.

Should I feed canned food, dry food, or both?

Studies indicate that cats perform much better with a canned diet for a variety of reasons, including weight loss. Canned foods are generally higher in protein, and since cats respond better to weight loss with high-protein diets, canned foods are ideal. Dogs respond well to either canned or dry diets; however, the energy (calorie) content is very important. Therefore, the total amount of diet and treats must be considered and adjusted to reduce the pet's weight or, once reduced, to keep it at the optimal level.

Practice Stamp or Name & Address