

WINNING AT WEIGHT LOSS

5 TIPS FOR SUCCESS

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LEARNING OBJECTIVE:

Upon completion reader should be able to discuss the importance of identifying and treating obesity in pets along with being able to outline how to implement these programs in practice.

Caring for overweight and obese patients is part of everyday life in practice. Based on a 2018 survey by the Association for the Prevention of Pet Obesity, 60% of cats and 56% of dogs were estimated to be overweight or obese.¹ We don't have more recent survey results yet, but we know obesity hasn't gone away during the pandemic. Conversations surrounding obesity and weight loss also haven't gotten easier, though there are some great resources to help navigate these tricky conversations for the veterinary healthcare team.

The 2021 AAHA Nutrition and Weight Management Guidelines for Dogs and Cats² is an excellent source of information on how to complete a nutritional assessment and communicate results to clients. A recent review on how to talk to clients about pet nutrition³ is also available. Now more than ever, we need to reclaim these conversations about nutrition and obesity to be able to inform and support pet parents. For better or worse, we know that the internet can serve as a first-line resource for pet owners. However, a study by Chen and colleagues in 2020

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demonstrated that it's hard to find accurate information about pet obesity and weight loss on the internet.⁴ This is where the veterinary team can step in to help pet parents recognize and treat obesity. The involvement of the entire veterinary team, and especially veterinary nurses, is the key to successful weight loss plans. Here are 5 tips that will have you winning at weight loss!

Tip #1: Get everyone on board **The veterinary staff**

The World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) included nutrition as the fifth vital assessment in 2011, along with temperature, pulse, respiration, and pain.⁵ This means that every pet should have a nutritional assessment performed at every visit, including body condition scoring (BCS) and muscle conditioning scoring (MCS). The Global Nutrition Toolkit (<https://wsava.org/global-guidelines/global-nutrition-guidelines/>) includes handouts and videos on how to perform these assessments. A complete nutritional assessment is the first step to identifying changes in body weight and condition, as well as risk factors for obesity. Once all team members can accurately recognize obesity in our patient population, we can start to address it together.

The adverse health effects of obesity in dogs and cats include not only arthritis and diabetes, which most of us are familiar with, but also most inflammatory diseases; these associations are well-reported and summarized elsewhere.⁶ This has led to the classification of obesity itself as a disease.⁷ Just like any other disease, a focus on prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of obesity is the responsibility of the veterinary health care team. Conversations

surrounding obesity prevention should start at the first puppy or kitten visit. Rapid weight gain during growth can increase the risk of obesity in adulthood^{8,9}, so monitoring growth curves during these early visits is important. We also know that the risk of obesity increases after neutering¹⁰, so preparing pet owners for this before surgery can lead to proactive changes in feeding practices and food selection to reduce the risk of weight gain post-op. Incorporating discussions about obesity prevention into each veterinary visit at an early age sets the stage for successful weight management during adulthood. Identifying unintended weight gain in young adults and utilizing the nutritional assessment to determine an underlying cause can lead to early intervention that prevents an overweight pet from continuing down the path to obesity. The entire veterinary staff has a role to play in normalizing conversations surrounding weight management. Once everyone in the clinic feels comfortable discussing obesity in a non-judgmental and scientific way, conversations with pet parents about this occasionally awkward topic naturally become easier and more common.

The pet parents

Before pet owners can embark on a weight loss plan with you, they must first recognize that their pet is obese and the consequences of this disease. This is easier said than done; studies have shown that pet owners regularly underestimate their dog's body condition when they are overweight.^{11,12} Familiarizing pet owners with a body condition

scoring system and equating numbers to body fat may help bridge the gap between owner misperceptions and the veterinary assessment of body condition. The more often pet owners hear and see the veterinary team using BCS and the nutritional assessment during the physical exam, the easier it will be for them to accept it as an important part of their pet's health.

Obesity is a disease that has been shown to reduce quality of life in both dogs¹³ and cats.^{14,15} It has also been shown to reduce lifespan in dogs.¹⁶ Emphasizing the impact of obesity on both quality and quantity of life can help owners realize the detrimental effect of obesity for their family. This is a delicate conversation that should inspire owners to focus on treatment—the good news is that obesity is a disease that can be cured! However, if the pet parents are not ready to commit to a weight loss program right away, that's okay. Starting the conversation by identifying obesity and informing pet parents on treatment strategies is the first step, and it may take multiple visits to build on this recommendation. Once the human family members are all in agreement that obesity is a problem and they are committed to a weight loss program, the work can begin!



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¹Kruger JM, Lulich JP, MacLeay J, et al. Comparison of foods with differing nutritional profiles for long-term management of acute nonobstructive idiopathic cystitis in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2015;247(5):508-517. ²Lulich JP, Kruger JM, MacLeay JM, et al. Efficacy of two commercially available, low-magnesium, urine acidifying dry foods for the dissolution of struvite uroliths in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2013;243(8):1147-1153. Average 27 days in vivo study in urolith forming cats. ³Pereira GG, Fragoso S, Pires E. Effect of dietary intake of L-tryptophan supplementation on multi-housed cats presenting stress related behaviours, in *Proceedings.* BSAVA 2010. ⁴Beata C, Beaumont-Graff E, Coll V, et al. Effect of alpha-casozepine (Zylkene) on anxiety in cats. *J Vet Behav.* 2007;2(2):40-46. ©2021 Hill's Pet Nutrition, Inc.



Tip #2: Evaluate current diet

As part of any nutritional assessment, the current diet should be examined to ensure it is complete and balanced and appropriate for the patient's life stage and health status. Gathering an accurate diet history is important, and there are many excellent diet history forms available to download from organizations like WSAVA and the American College of Veterinary Nutrition (ACVN). Asking pet owners to fill these out at home before the appointment can result in a more complete and accurate diet history. Especially when considering weight loss, it is fundamental to collect a diet history that includes all food items (including commercial pet foods, treats, chews, human foods, supplements, etc.) and their amounts. This will help with calculating current calorie intake, which can guide feeding recommendations, but it also gives us invaluable insight into owner preferences and potential barriers to successful weight loss.

For example, are treats an important part of the daily routine? Are foods used to administer medications? Are there other pets in the household that should be considered when developing the weight loss plan? Do visitors or people outside

the household regularly feed the pet? Establishing an accurate picture of what the patient is eating requires knowing who is feeding the pet, what (and how much) is fed, and how frequently feeding occurs. Asking open-ended questions to trace everything the dog or cat eats in an average day is vital. If the diet varies from day to day, asking pet owners to keep a food journal to record intake for a few days or weeks is advised. Although the diet is likely to change as part of the weight loss plan, knowing where the pet is starting is always important.

Tip #3: Give specific feeding recommendations

Type

If a patient is diagnosed with obesity and is not already eating a therapeutic weight loss food, then a food change is likely needed. Compared to typical wellness or maintenance foods, therapeutic weight loss foods are formulated with a higher nutrient-to-calorie ratio so that they can safely be fed at reduced intake. Since most pets require caloric reduction below their maintenance energy requirements for successful weight loss, this is important to help avoid nutrient deficiencies. There

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have been numerous studies evaluating the risk of various nutrient deficiencies in dogs and cats during weight loss when fed a typical maintenance food.^{17,18} Besides providing a safer feeding strategy, therapeutic weight loss foods also have some common features like lower calorie density, increased fiber, higher protein, and reduced fat content to improve satiety and weight loss success.

Other unique offerings, like foods that alter basal metabolism¹⁹ and low carbohydrate/high protein foods for cats²⁰, as well as weight loss foods that are combined with other therapeutic foods for common comorbidities (*e.g.*, osteoarthritis + obesity, urinary disease + obesity) allow for selection of a weight loss food that can be tailored to the individual patient's needs. The food form can also be important. Increasing water intake by feeding canned food, or even adding water to dry food, reduces calorie density and has been shown to reduce energy intake in cats.²¹ Feeding wet food may even increase physical activity in cats^{22,23} which can help with weight loss. With so many options, it's not hard to find an effective therapeutic weight loss food that meets owner and pet expectations and has been clinically shown to work!

Amount

There are many ways to calculate how many calories to feed a dog or cat for weight loss.²⁴ One option is to reduce calories based on current intake, usually by 20%, which requires an accurate

assessment of current intake. That means going back to the diet history collected earlier. Alternatively, energy needs for weight loss can be calculated based on body weight. Using ideal body weight is common but assumes you can accurately estimate the pet's ideal weight. There are various methods for determining ideal body weight, but the most accurate way is to look at the individual patient's history. Hopefully, the medical records will reveal an ideal body weight at some point, maybe early in adulthood, especially if body weight and BCS are regularly recorded at each visit! If there is no data on historical ideal weight available, calculations based on the patient's current body condition score^{25,26} or body fat²⁷ can be used. These scoring systems have been validated to correspond to a body fat percentage, and calculations using these methods are described in detail elsewhere.²⁴ Tools like the Hill's BFI Risk Chart are also available as resources.

The most important thing to remember about any of these methods of determining feeding amounts is that they are a starting point, only. Some dogs and cats need to eat more or less than the calculated amount to lose weight at a safe and appropriate rate. Although feeding instructions should always accompany a food recommendation, emphasizing that these initial instructions may change based on monitoring will prepare the pet owner for possible alterations to feeding amounts in the future.

Frequency

How often to feed pets during weight loss comes down to household preference and patient factors. Although smaller, more frequent meals could improve satiety and reduce begging behaviors in some pets, that may not be practical for all pet parents. Cats tend to be natural grazers and multiple meals are usually recommended to help increase activity^{23,28}, but studies have also shown successful weight loss when cats are fed a single meal per day.²⁹ Some patients may have a

medical condition that dictates the number of meals required per day (for example, canine diabetics who eat twice daily when they get their insulin). Consideration should be given to the type of food (moist vs. wet) and who has access to the food if it is left out for long periods. Studies have not dictated a right or wrong answer to how often we should feed pets during weight loss, though meal frequency is one factor that can be adjusted during the weight loss plan to optimize success.

Method

In addition to frequency, the method of feeding should be taken into account. The use of feeder toys and automatic feeders have increased our options for feeding pets. Placing dry food in puzzle toys may increase activity levels and enrichment for both dogs and cats, though additional research is needed to determine the effect of these tools on weight management.³⁰ Automatic feeders may allow for multiple meals per day despite an owner's schedule. Automatic feeders with pet recognition (collar or microchip) can be a great solution for multi-pet households³¹, especially when different foods must be fed.

The inclusion of technology into the weight loss program applies not only to feeding method, but also how we measure dog and cat food. Using a gram scale to weigh food is much more accurate than using a volume measurement (like cups or tablespoons). Encouraging pet owners to weigh their pet's food can help ensure the patient is receiving the recommended calories. Weighing food also makes it much easier to make small adjustments to feeding amounts over the course of the weight loss program. Using a gram scale to measure dry food is preferred for all cats and small dogs, but even larger dogs will benefit from the accurate and consistent use of a scale to measure food.³²

Treats

Treats are never required, but they represent an important part of the diet for many pets and owners. Providing

Treats and even some human foods are an acceptable part of a weight loss program, provided the type and amount is carefully dictated and the daily intake remains within the 10% treat allowance.

an allowance for treats in a weight loss plan can make the program much more successful! If treats, human foods, or supplements are included, these items should be limited to 10% or less of daily calorie intake to maintain an overall balanced diet.³³ When deciding whether to include a treat allowance, it's a good idea to go back to the diet history. If treats are already included, is it possible to continue the current treats, or do we need to find lower calorie alternatives? Dental chews are a great example of a treat that can be important for the pet's health and owner compliance, but these products can easily surpass the allotted calories for treats. Table scraps are another type of treat that can be high in calories, but also hard to quantify.

In these cases, discussing the importance of such treats with the pet owners can help the veterinary team determine if they can be discontinued or replaced. Treats and even some human foods are an acceptable part of a weight loss program, provided the type and amount is carefully dictated and the daily intake remains within the 10% treat allowance.

Tip #4: Outline the plan

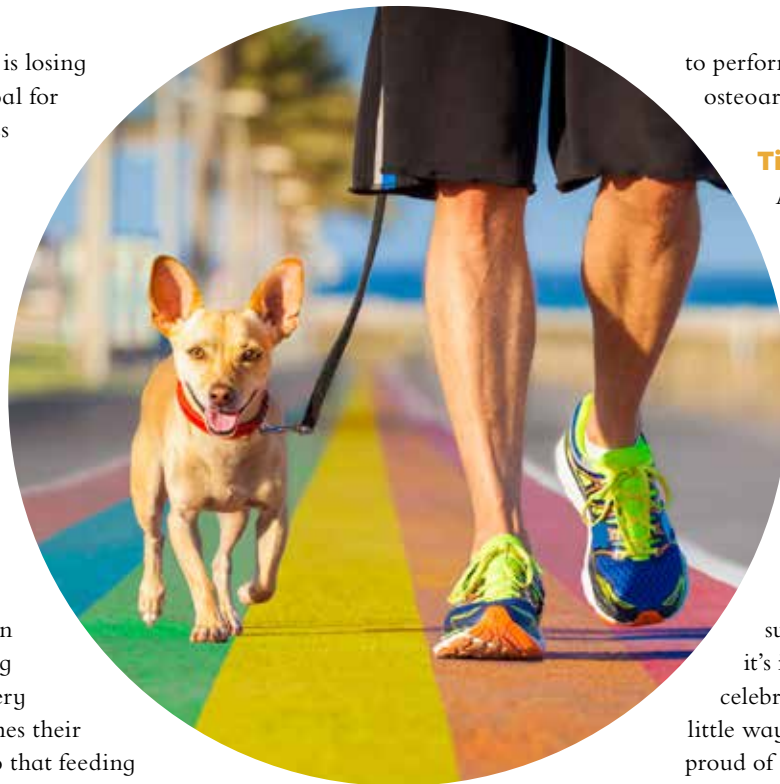
Once both the vet and pet family are in agreement about pursuing a weight loss program, and the initial feeding recommendations have been made, it's time to prepare the pet owner for what to expect. In order for any weight loss plan to be successful, regular rechecks of body weight and body condition are required!

This will ensure that the pet is losing weight at a safe rate. The goal for dogs is 1-2% body weight loss per week. Cats are similar, though a slightly slower rate is considered acceptable (0.5-2% per week).²⁴ Based on how much weight the pet has to lose, and the rate at which they are losing, it can take many months or even years for pets to reach their target weight. Preparing pet owners for this timeline in advance, and maintaining a steady rate of weight loss, will help reduce frustration in the future. Proactively setting up recheck appointments every 2-4 weeks until the pet reaches their target weight is important so that feeding amounts can be adjusted if needed.

Remember, initial feeding instructions are just a starting point, and altering these amounts in 10% increments is recommended if pets are losing weight slower or faster than the recommended rate.²⁴ Monthly weight checks at the clinic can be challenging for some owners, and especially difficult for cats, so advising pet owners to invest in a scale to weigh small pets at home is a good idea. Weights can then be reported to the clinic every few weeks for further recommendations. Once the pet gets close to estimated ideal or target weight, it is important to schedule an in-person recheck to assess BCS.

Exercise

Although our focus here is on nutrition, the impact of exercise on a weight loss plan should not be overlooked. Studies have shown that incorporating an exercise plan can help maintain lean body mass during weight loss.³⁴ The exact amount and type of exercise that will best accompany a weight loss plan has not been thoroughly investigated in dogs and cats, and likely depends on starting activity levels and ability. In general, gradually increasing



to perform certain exercises (like osteoarthritis or a recent surgery).

Tip #5: Address the results

Anyone who has embarked on a weight loss program with a client knows that it can be incredibly rewarding but also terribly frustrating. That's why it's important to consistently collect results via weight checks and promptly address those results with the owner. If there are plateaus in weight loss, reviewing the feeding plan and adjusting feeding amounts is required. If successful weight loss is occurring, it's important to take the time to celebrate with the pet owner! Finding little ways to make the pet parents feel proud of their work by rewarding them with attention (on social media or via congratulations from the entire staff during the visit) or other tokens/prizes will inspire them to keep going. Hosting a weight loss contest for clients and staff can tap into our natural competitiveness and provides an opportunity for everyone to focus on weight management for a prescribed amount of time.

Even when all five of these tips are incorporated into the plan and the pet owners are compliant, it is simply harder for some pets to shed the pounds compared to others. Certain health conditions or medications can interfere with successful weight loss or may predispose pets to weight gain. For many pets, obesity is not the only disease that needs to be managed, and certain medical conditions may need to be prioritized over weight management. For pets that require significant calorie restriction for weight loss, or for patients with comorbidities that require an alternative nutritional approach, consultation with a board-certified veterinary nutritionist[®] is recommended.

Once the patient reaches ideal body weight, it's important to continue to reinforce the importance of good feeding

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low impact activity like walking for dogs or interactive play for cats is beneficial. Activity monitors are available, though validation in dogs and cats is limited and their utility in weight loss plans is unclear. However, this type of technology can get pet owners excited and motivated about implementing an exercise plan at home.

Some types of physical activity may be contraindicated for certain pets. Consultation with a veterinary rehabilitation practitioner can be considered to help formulate an exercise plan, especially for pets that have comorbidities that limit their ability

practices. Studies in both dogs and cats show that energy requirements remain low after weight loss, which makes it easy for pets to regain the weight they lost.^{35,36} In fact, weight regain has been reported to occur in approximately half of dogs and cats that successfully complete a weight loss program.^{37,38} This means that continuing to closely monitor body weight and BCS, and feed a low-calorie weight loss food, is important to maintain ideal body weight in previously obese pets. **J**

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LET'S REVIEW...

1. Where should pet owners go to find the most reliable information on obesity and weight management?
 - a. The internet
 - b. Textbooks on animal health
 - c. The veterinary health care team
 - d. Breeders and breed-specific clubs

2. Which of the following statements is FALSE?
 - a. Pet owners usually provide an accurate assessment of obesity in their own pets
 - b. Obesity is a disease that adversely affects quality of life
 - c. A nutritional assessment should be performed at every visit
 - d. Both the veterinary staff and the pet owners need to be on board for a successful weight loss program

3. Why is it important to evaluate the current diet before making recommendations for weight loss?
 - a. To figure out how many calories the pet is currently eating
 - b. To understand owner preferences
 - c. To evaluate what current treats can and cannot be included in the weight loss plan
 - d. All of the above

4. What is the target rate of weight loss for cats?
 - a. 0.25-0.5% per week
 - b. 1-2% per week
 - c. 0.5-2% per week
 - d. 2-3% per week

5. Which of the following statements are TRUE about weight regain in pets?
 - a. It's not very common—once they lose weight, they tend to keep it off
 - b. About half of dogs and cats will regain weight after weight loss
 - c. It's impossible to prevent weight regain in obese-prone animals
 - d. Energy requirements usually increase significantly after weight loss



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