



Pet Obesity: Five Years On







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“Tell me and I forget, teach
me and I may remember,
involve me and I learn.”

Benjamin Franklin





Foreword

How far we've come since 2009

We love pets, and since the release of our first in-depth pet obesity report in 2009, PFMA has strived to use its position as leading trade body for the UK pet food industry to support pet professionals and encourage owners to stop overfeeding and under-exercising pets.¹ Helping owners manage these known contributors to obesity will hopefully put a stop to killing with kindness, ensuring all pets live a happy and healthy life. As pet food manufacturers, we feel it is our duty to help.

A key finding from our report five years ago was pet owners' lack of understanding around what constitutes a healthy size. We worked in partnership with our members, vets and pet charity organisations to create a range of tools, including Pet Size-O-Meters, to help owners maximise the wellbeing and life expectancy of their pets and get to grips with the weighty issue of obesity. Together with Britain's network of re-homing charities and more recently vets, PFMA has circulated around 400,000 Pet Size-O-Meters to date.

Owners and vets have long recognised treating with unsuitable 'human' food and guesstimating portion sizes as key factors to correct. In May 2013, we launched Weigh in Wednesdays in locations across the country to bring the pet care sector together to promote the importance of good nutrition, responsible feeding and weight management to pet owners.

There is still work to be done

Five years on from our original report, we set out to conduct follow-up research to gauge how much the pet obesity needle has moved – would obesity still prove a pressing issue for the UK's 24.5 million pets?

It is with some sadness that I report on the state of the matter today, with little improvement realised over the last five years. Three in four (77%) vets believe the pet obesity problem has worsened since 2009, while two in three (63%) owners feel more important problems face their pets – perhaps unaware of the life-limiting consequences obesity can have.²

However, I am heartened to hear that 93% of pet owners say they would be concerned to discover that their pet is overweight. Owners are willing to take positive action and with the right guidance, they can.³ All the tools are in place for pet owners and pet care professionals to better pets' lives together – now is the time to use them. We have spoken to owners rationally and now need to engage them emotionally – drawing on the powerful words of Benjamin Franklin – involving them in initiatives to achieve the positive change pets need.

New initiatives for 2014

To help spread the word about ideal pet weight, PFMA will launch a #GetPetsFit campaign in May this year. A host of pet experts are drawing the community of Teddington, London Borough of Richmond, together to change its pets' fortunes – watch this space. We are also calling for as many pet owners, professionals and communities as possible across the nation to join our mission to #GetPetsFit.

Armed with fresh knowledge and motivated by direct, active engagement, we hope Britain's pet owners will begin to tackle pet obesity on a scale never before seen in the UK. By working in partnership with various pet care organisations, we are jump-starting the journey to ensuring our pets can enjoy the benefits of the same kind of healthy and happy existence we try to create for ourselves.

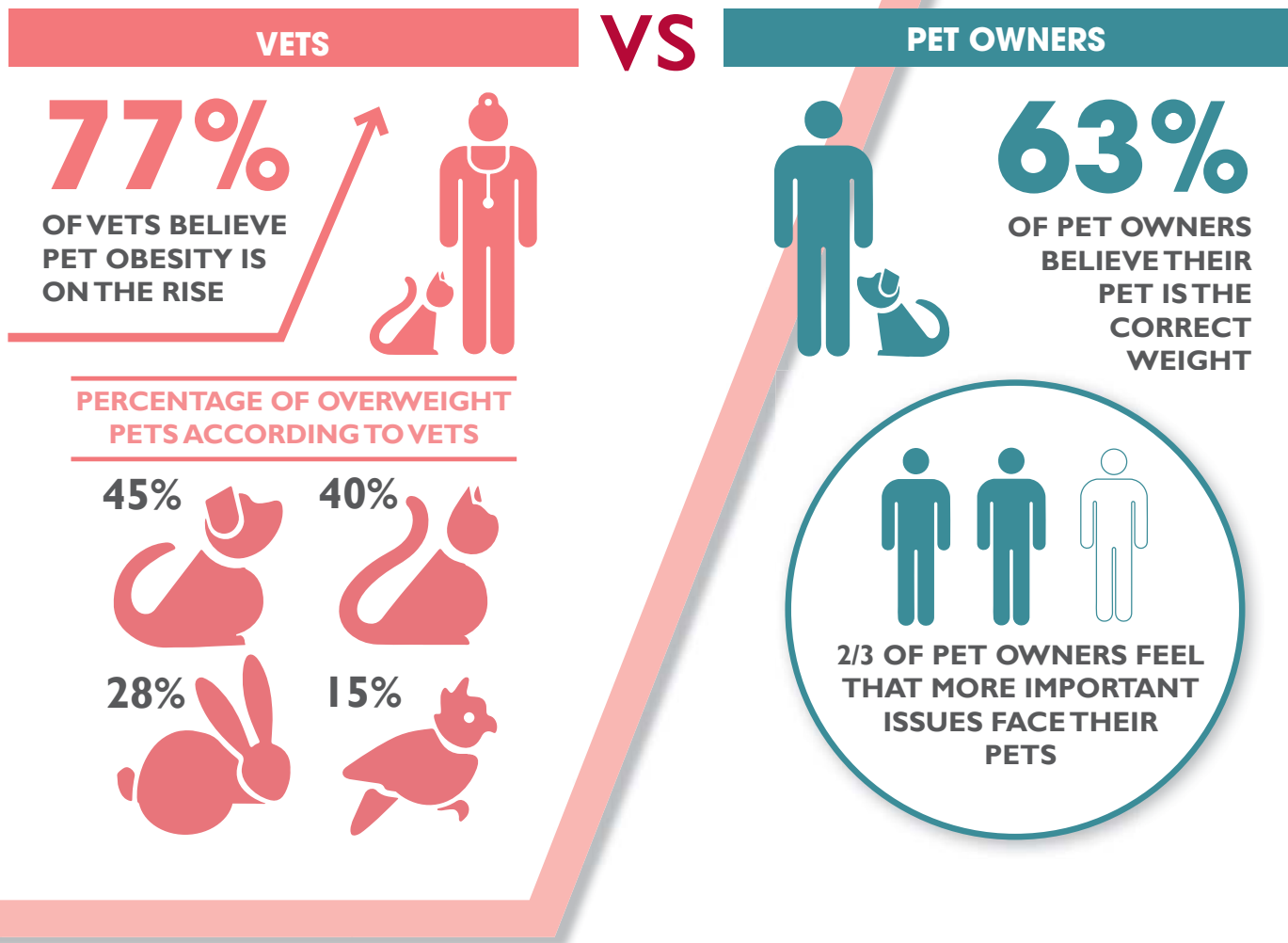
Michael Bellingham, Chief Executive of PFMA



Five years on, where is the UK on the issue of pet obesity?



While pet owners' awareness of pet obesity has improved by 30% since 2009, this awareness is not leading to action, with most (77%) vets believing that pet obesity remains on the rise. Vets estimate that up to 45% of all pets they treat are overweight or obese, yet two in three (63%) pet owners believe their pet is the correct weight.⁴

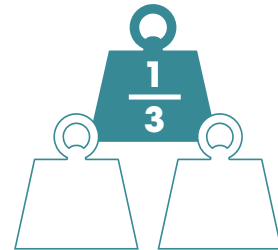


Pet owners unaware loved ones are at risk

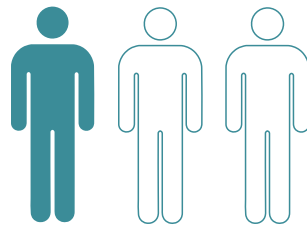
Despite pet obesity being a potentially life-limiting condition, it seems pet owners are unaware of the gravity of the issue, with most (63%) feeling more important problems face their pets.⁵ What's more, only one in three (37%) know how to check their pet's weight, a mere 9% carry out the recommended monthly weight check and almost a third (30%) never check their pet's weight.⁶



ONLY 37% OF PET OWNERS KNOW HOW TO CHECK THEIR PET'S WEIGHT



30% OF OWNERS NEVER CHECK THEIR PET'S WEIGHT



OVER A THIRD OF PET OWNERS USE 'HUMAN' FOOD TO TREAT, WHICH CAN BE TOO HIGH IN FAT AND SOMETIMES TOXIC



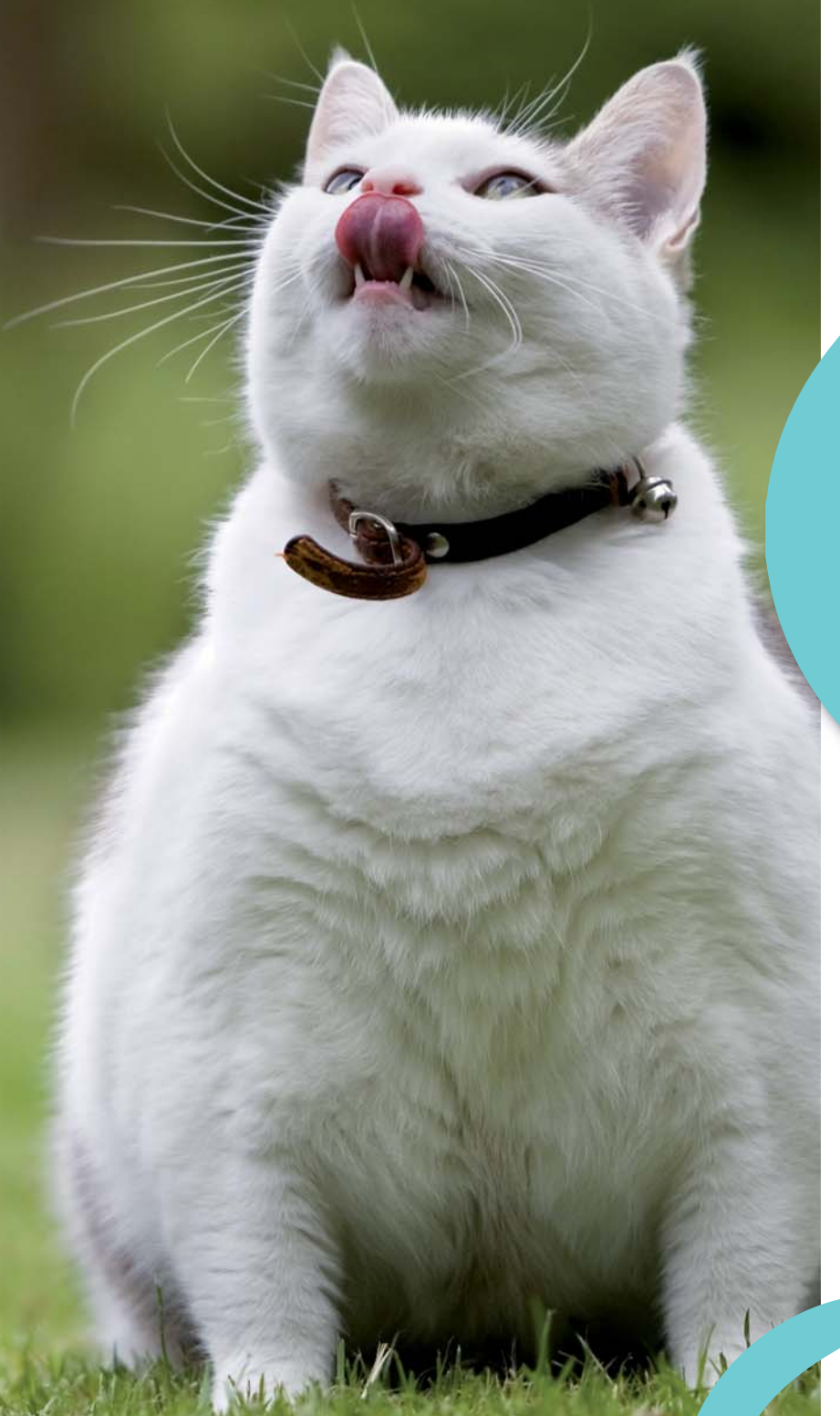
68% OF PET OWNERS DO NOT FOLLOW PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE WHEN DECIDING PORTION SIZE

The pet obesity epidemic

It's easy to want to express affection for a much-loved pet by rewarding them with tasty treats – findings show that nearly half (48%) of pet owners are treating pets more than twice a day.⁷ Over five years there has been a 28% increase in cat and dog owners feeding pets table leftovers.⁸ These acts of apparent kindness can put pets at risk – according to vets, treating with leftover food is a leading cause of pet weight gain (78% for dogs).⁹

Vets state that another problem is owners not following feeding guidelines, something cited as the single biggest contributor to weight gain for all pets (especially acute among cats, 72%, small furrries, 60% and indoor birds, 28%).¹⁰ More 'titbits' should generally mean smaller main meals to compensate. Currently, two in three (68%) pet owners do not follow professional guidelines when deciding portion size, with 30% taking a cavalier approach relying purely on instinct.¹¹

Owners view overfeeding and too little exercise (75% and 74% respectively) as joint contributors to pet obesity, yet nearly one in ten (8%) believe no exercise is necessary for their particular pet. As with humans, all pets need exercise and it is incredibly important to balance regular meals and treats with sufficient activity in order to maintain a healthy weight.¹²



A need for action

“By far and away the biggest concern amongst veterinary surgeons in practice is overfeeding leading to obesity. This is primarily a problem of human behaviour and a mismatch between the amount of food and the amount of exercise. All pets should be fed a nutritionally balanced diet and kept to their normal body weight.”

Robin Hargreaves, President of the British Veterinary Association (BVA)

“Misperception of pet body condition most certainly is a factor in pet obesity and one which needs to be recognised so that positive steps can be taken to ensure the number of overweight pets in the UK is reduced. Certainly the best way forward is continued education of pet owners.”

Dr Philippa Yam MRCVS, Senior Lecturer in Small Animal Science, University of Glasgow

“We must continue pushing the pet health message until overweight pets are no longer considered the ‘norm’. We need to raise awareness of pet obesity to pave the way for positive action.”

Zara Boland BVSc BE MRCVS, Founder of VetVoice Ltd

“While I take Frank for regular walks, I do like to reward him with lots of tasty treats. I would definitely welcome some professional advice on how to keep him in shape.”

Jessica Pearson, dog owner from Walton-on-Thames



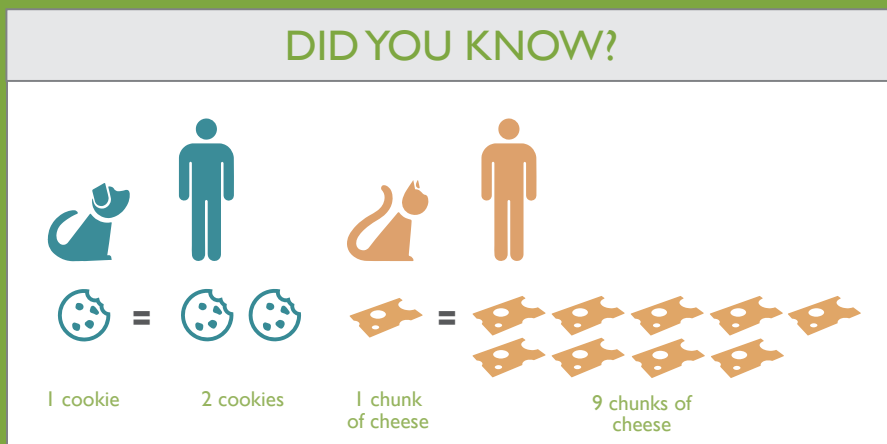
Overfeeding is a problem



Many consider pets part of the family and in some cases, owners would rather buy a present for their pet than a close relative.¹³ Many owners are over-humanising pets, with one in three (36%) feeding pets 'human' food treats, nearly half (48%) feeding treats more than twice a day and around a quarter (23%) feeding pets table leftovers, unknowingly putting them at risk.¹⁴ Treating in this way means that important

nutritional requirements are sometimes not met. In addition, the BVA's Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) explains that 'human' food such as chocolate is one of the most common causes of poisoning in dogs, and can be toxic to cats, rabbits and rodents.¹⁵ Owners must find the sweet spot, expressing affection for their pet in a more responsible way, via training, verbal rewards and playtime.

To put this issue into perspective, the following diagram shows what the reality of overfeeding can look like.



*Based on a 10kg dog, a 4.5kg cat and an average-sized woman



Treats



Pets are just like humans – both need a balanced diet that includes food with the right levels of nutrients.

75% of pet owners admit that overfeeding and giving tidbits play a large part in pets piling on the pounds.

74% realise a lack of exercise can cause pets' weight issues.

“It is true that overweight pets don't get enough exercise. However I also feel that they have too many treats. Some people think that if they are feeding the obesity or low calorie diet to their pet, the odd treat here and there won't count. I advise pet owners to keep a pet food diary so they can reflect on how many extras they are really giving.”

Donna Lewis, longstanding BVNA Council Member



Substituting food for love



The emotional bond

As popular wisdom puts it, a dog is 'man's best friend'. Pets are often regarded as part of the family and can provide many benefits to owners, from walking outdoors and making regular exercise more fun, to companionship and helping to reduce stress levels. Encouragingly, nearly one in three (31%) pet owners are providing up to an hour's exercise a day – however, none are meeting the recommended four hours' daily minimum for rabbits.

Feeding the right diet

The two main types of pet food are 'complete' and 'complementary'.

Complete pet food contains all the nutrition pets need – it is suitable as a daily diet without any additional food.

Complementary pet food is designed to form only part of a pet's diet – generally, it would not meet nutritional requirements if fed alone. Complementary food is usually referred to as a 'prepared treat' and should be fed to pets in moderation.

One of the best ways to achieve the correct balance of nutrients is to feed according to 'life stage', feeding a different diet according to whether pets are babies, adults or seniors.



Follow the recommended feeding guidelines.

Remember that they are guides and you may need to adjust feeding amounts depending on your pet's lifestyle

Be aware of how much you are feeding your pet as a family. Run a rota system to keep an eye on portions and ensure treats are not doubled up

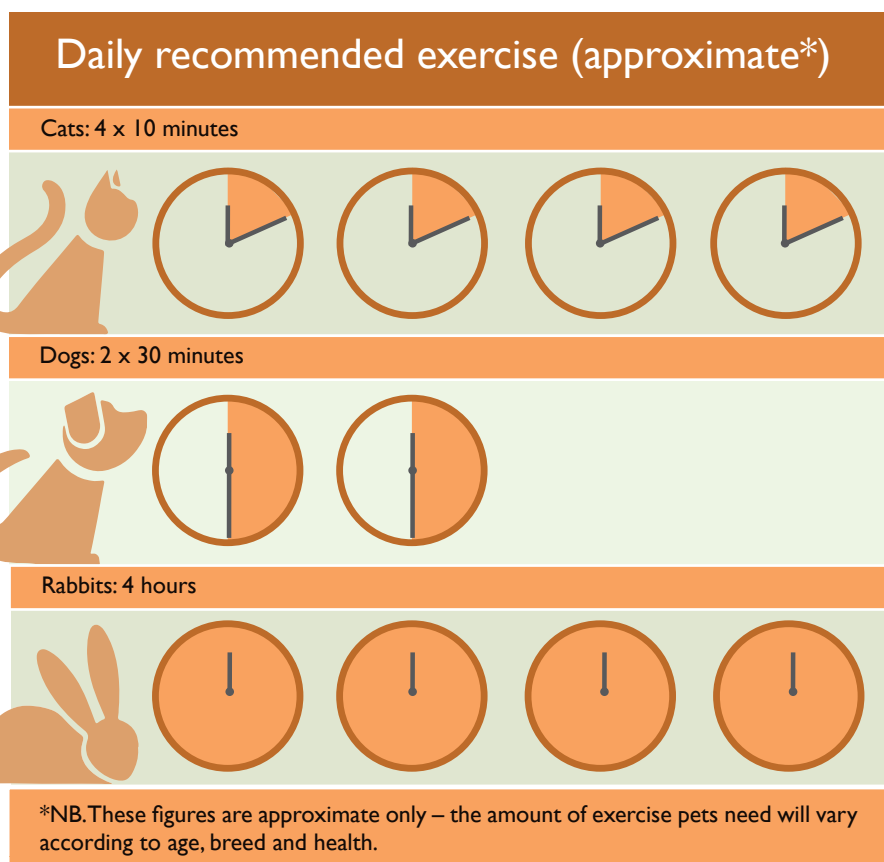
“Pet breeders, trainers, charities, behaviourists and dog walkers must ensure their clients understand that treats are not supplementary but form part of the pet's daily food intake. If exercise is reduced then food intake should, in turn, be compensated. Everyone in the pet industry must work together to resolve this issue.”

Jacky MacKenzie, Founder of Teddington-based pet care company Paws for Thought



Let's get moving!

Diet isn't the only factor that can determine a pet's weight – exercise also plays a vital role. Vets currently view lack of exercise as a significant contributor to pet weight gain.¹⁷ As per the diagram to the right, cats (particularly indoor cats) should have at least forty minutes of playtime daily and roughly, adult dogs need at least an hour.¹⁸ Vets are best placed to give advice and guidance on this as for example some dogs may need longer, more vigorous walks.



“Exercise plays a very important role in weight reduction, and it also improves general health. Dog walking will not only help your pet but will help improve your fitness too. Research shows that walking a dog helps reduce stress as well as helping you to keep fit.”

John Foster MRCVS,
Chairman of the Pet Health Council



The true cost of pet obesity



There is nothing 'cuddly' about an obese pet.

Neglecting to feed and exercise pets to optimum levels can knock off up to two years of active life.¹⁹ Overweight pets, like humans, can suffer from a myriad of related health problems. Obesity causes animals discomfort and illness that can result in both emotional distress and financial pressure for owners – just a 20% increase in body weight can contribute to conditions such as diabetes, osteoarthritis and cardiovascular and respiratory disease.²⁰

Pet obesity is far easier to prevent than treat, so there is every reason to act now.²¹



ARTHRITIS

Arthritis or 'joint wear and tear' can be a significant cause of pain and disability for pets.²²

Encouragingly, maintaining a normal weight is proven to reduce occurrence of arthritis even in pets genetically predisposed to this condition. In fact, just 7-8% weight loss for arthritic obese pets can result in a dramatic improvement in mobility.²³

DIABETES

Diabetes is a major issue for overweight pets – particularly cats and dogs, with around one in 500 developing the condition.²⁴

It is best to take action to improve pet health before any of the symptoms of diabetes set in, as this condition is irreversible.

HEART DISEASE

Overweight pets are at increased risk of developing high resting heart rates, high blood pressure and heart disease, which can in turn lead to heart failure.²⁵

Weight loss is proven to dramatically reduce the risk of heart disease and even completely reverse some of its effects.²⁶

Financial pressure

The majority of pet owners are aware of fixed costs associated with pet ownership – such as annual vet check-ups and vaccinations – and are somewhat prepared for the cost of occasional accidents.

Treating pets with inappropriate food costs owners around £215 million a year³⁰

What many may not realise is that significant additional bills can occur from medical emergencies and treatments linked to overfeeding and unsuitable treating – treating pets with inappropriate food costs owners around £215 million a year.²⁷ Also, with an increase in obesity-related claims over the past few years, some pet insurers are considering cutting pay-outs for obese pets, just as the industry has done in the case of human health insurance.²⁸ Certain pet insurers already include clauses stating pets not in a 'normal healthy state' at the initial time of cover cannot later claim for related injury or illness.²⁹

To keep things simple, pet weight should be well-managed from the outset. Additional bills like these are widely preventable when pets' optimum weight is maintained.



The solution

Back to basics

A core solution to the issue of pet obesity is owner education. Most (93%) owners say they would be concerned to discover that their pet is overweight, indicating that they are ready and willing to take positive action.³¹

Help is at hand

It has never been easier to better pet health. Owners can receive counsel about pet weight concerns from qualified UK vets or vet nurses and currently 78% of Britain's vets run obesity clinics.³² More information, tools and guidance can be found at www.pfma.org.uk – PFMA encourages all pet owners to use its Pet Size-O-Meters to check their pet's weight is in line with guidelines.

Dog Size-O-Meter

Size-O-Meter Score:

Characteristics:

1

Very Thin

More than 20% below ideal body weight



- Ribs, spine and hip bones are very easily seen (in short haired pets)
- Obvious loss of muscle bulk
- No fat can be felt under the skin

2

Thin

Between 10-20% below ideal body weight



- Ribs, spine and hip bones easily seen
- Obvious waist and abdominal tuck
- Very little fat can be felt under the skin



3

Ideal



- Ribs, spine and hip bones easily felt
- Visible waist with an abdominal tuck
- A small amount of fat can be felt

4

Overweight

10-15% above ideal body weight



- Ribs, spine and hip bones are hard to feel
- Waist barely visible with a broad back
- Layer of fat on belly and at base of tail

5

Obese

More than 15% above ideal body weight



- Ribs, spine and hip bones extremely difficult to feel under a thick layer of fat
- No waist can be seen and belly may droop significantly
- Heavy fat pads on lower back and at the base of the tail

Derived from BCS validated by: Keely, et al. Effects of diet restriction on life span and age related changes in dogs. JAVMA 2002.
Lafamme DP. Development and validation of a body condition score system for dogs. Canine Practice. July/August 1997, 22:10-15
Mawby D, Bartges JW, Moyers, T et al. Comparison of body fat estimates by dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry and deuterium oxide dilution in client owned dogs.



- Your pet is a healthy weight
- Seek advice about your pet's weight
- Seek advice as your pet could be at risk

Please note

There are some cases where the natural shape of a dog may mean this simple system doesn't translate as easily. For example, Whippets and Greyhounds tend to have lean physiques while a Staffie will have a broader shape. A Bichon Frisé will have a nice fluffy coat for you to contend with. If you need help using the tool, download a hard copy version and take it to your local vet or pet care professional for advice.



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Cat Size-0-Meter

Size-0-Meter Score:

Characteristics:

1

Very Thin

More than 20% below ideal body weight



- Ribs, spine and hip bones are very easily seen (in short haired pets)
- Pronounced waist
- Obvious loss of muscle mass with no belly fat

2

Thin

Between 10-20% below ideal body weight



- Ribs, spine and hip bones easily seen
- Obvious waist
- Very little belly fat



3

Ideal



- Ribs, spine and hip bones easily felt
- Visible waist
- A small amount of belly fat

4

Overweight

10-15% above ideal body weight



- Ribs, spine and hip bones are hard to feel
- No defined waist
- Slightly sagging belly

5

Obese

More than 15% above ideal body weight



- Ribs, spine and hip bones extremely difficult to feel under a padding of fat
- No waist can be seen
- Heavy fat pads on lower back and an obvious sagging belly – skin rolls may sway from side to side when walking

Derived from BCSC validated by: Laflamme DP. Development and validation of a body condition score system for cats. A clinical tool. Feline Practice, 1997, 28:13-17
Laflamme DP, Hume E, Harrison J. Evaluation of zoonotic measures as an assessment of body composition of dogs and cats. Compendium 2001;23(Suppl 9A):88



- Your pet is a healthy weight
- Seek advice about your pet's weight
- Seek advice as your pet could be at risk

Please note

There are some cases where the natural shape of a cat may mean this simple system doesn't translate as easily. For example, if your cat has a long coat it may be difficult to judge the shape. There are also some breeds of cats, such as Maine Coon, that are generally larger than the average moggie – however they should still have the same body shape. If you need help using the tool, download a hard copy version and take it to your local vet or pet care professional for advice.



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Rabbit Size-O-Meter

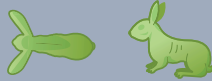
Size-O-Meter Score:

Characteristics:

1

Very Thin

More than 20% below ideal body weight



- Hip bones, ribs and spine are very sharp to the touch
- Loss of muscle and no fat cover
- The rump area curves in

2

Thin

Between 10-20% below ideal body weight



- Hip bones, ribs and spine are easily felt
- Loss of muscle and very little fat cover
- Rump area is flat



3

Ideal



- Hip bones, ribs and spine easily felt but are rounded, not sharp – Ribs feel like a pocket full of pens!
- No abdominal bulge
- Rump area is flat

4

Overweight

10-15% above ideal body weight



- Pressure is needed to feel the ribs, spine and hip bones
- Some fat layers
- The rump is rounded

5

Obese

More than 15% above ideal body weight



- Very hard to feel the spine and hip bones – Ribs can't be felt!
- Tummy sags with obvious fat padding
- Rump bulges out



- Your pet is a healthy weight
- Seek advice about your pet's weight
- Seek advice as your pet could be at risk

Please note

Getting hands on is the key to this simple system. Whilst the pictures in the Rabbit Size-O-Meter will help, judging whether your pet is the right weight purely by sight alone has its difficulties. A long coat can disguise ribs, hip bones and the spine, while a short coat can make a rabbit's appearance more irregular and highlight these areas. You will need to gently feel your pet which can be a pleasurable bonding experience for both of you!



Bird Size-0-Meter

Size-0-Meter Score:

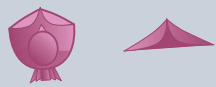
Characteristics:

1 Very Thin



- Breast bone is very sharp to the touch
- Loss of breast muscle and no fat cover

2 Thin



- Breast bone is easily felt and sharp
- Loss of breast muscle and little or no fat cover

3 Ideal



- Breast bone easily felt but not sharp
- Breast muscle rounded

4 Overweight



- Pressure is needed to feel the breast bone
- Well rounded breast muscle and some fat cover
- May see some fat below where breast bone ends

5 Obese



- Very hard or not possible to feel the breast bone
- Very rounded muscle and possible to feel or see fat moving under the skin.
- Fat also obvious below where the breast bone ends

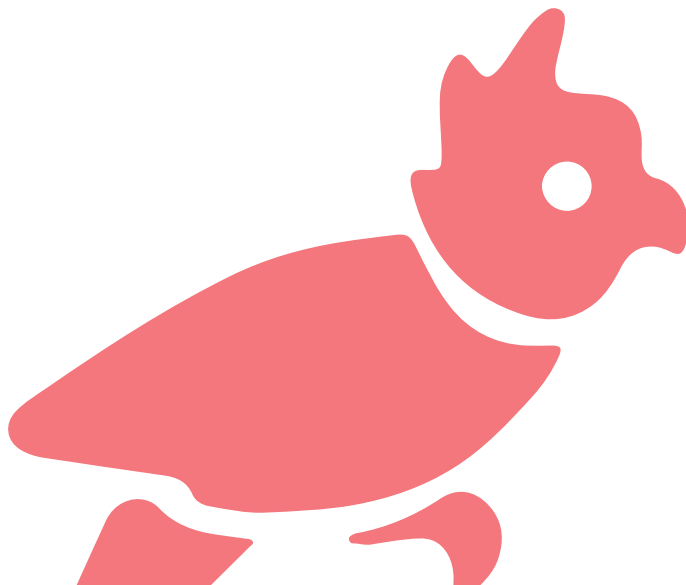
Produced with assistance and advice from Anna Meredith MRCVS

- Your pet is a healthy weight
- Seek advice about your pet's weight
- Seek advice as your pet could be at risk



How to check your birds shape

- Getting hands on is key. Not all birds are used to being handled but it is difficult to judge if your bird is the right weight by sight. You will need to gently feel your bird, using restraint if necessary.
- Use bare hands and not gloves to handle birds as then you can judge the tightness of grip. If you need to protect yourself - use a cloth or towel.
- Small birds can be held in one hand with the neck between the first and second finger and the bird's back against the palm so that the wings and body are gently restrained in the closed hand.
- Larger parrots may take two people, one to hold the bird and the other to assess its body condition. A towel or cloth is used over the open hand to grasp the bird firmly behind its head and neck. The towel is then wrapped around the wings and body to prevent flapping. Gently stroking the top of the head and talking to the bird gently will help to calm it.
- Gently run your fingertips down the centre of the front of the bird in the midline over the breast area. You should be able to feel a bony ridge (known as the keel or breast bone). This should be easy to feel but not too prominent.
- Next, run your fingers at right angles to the keel across the breast muscles. If these feel shrunken so that the keel sticks out prominently your bird is too thin. If the breast muscles are just rounded but you can still feel the keel your bird is in good condition. If you cannot feel the keel and the muscles are very rounded or you can feel or see fat moving underneath the skin your bird is overweight.
- The breast muscle can also vary in size depending on how much exercise your bird gets - so if it flies a lot it will have larger firmer breast muscles than a bird who does not fly. However, the same criteria still apply in assessing body condition - prominence of the bony keel and presence of fat underneath the skin.



#GetPetsFit campaign

This year PFMA launches its #GetPetsFit campaign, encouraging pet owners from across the UK to take matters into their own hands, joining the fight against pet obesity in their local communities. As part of the campaign, PFMA will roll out a pilot 'fit camp for pets' initiative launching in Teddington, London Borough of Richmond, a community that views its pets as central to day-to-day life. PFMA hopes the campaign will showcase to the rest of the nation how people can come together in order to improve the fortunes of their beloved pets.

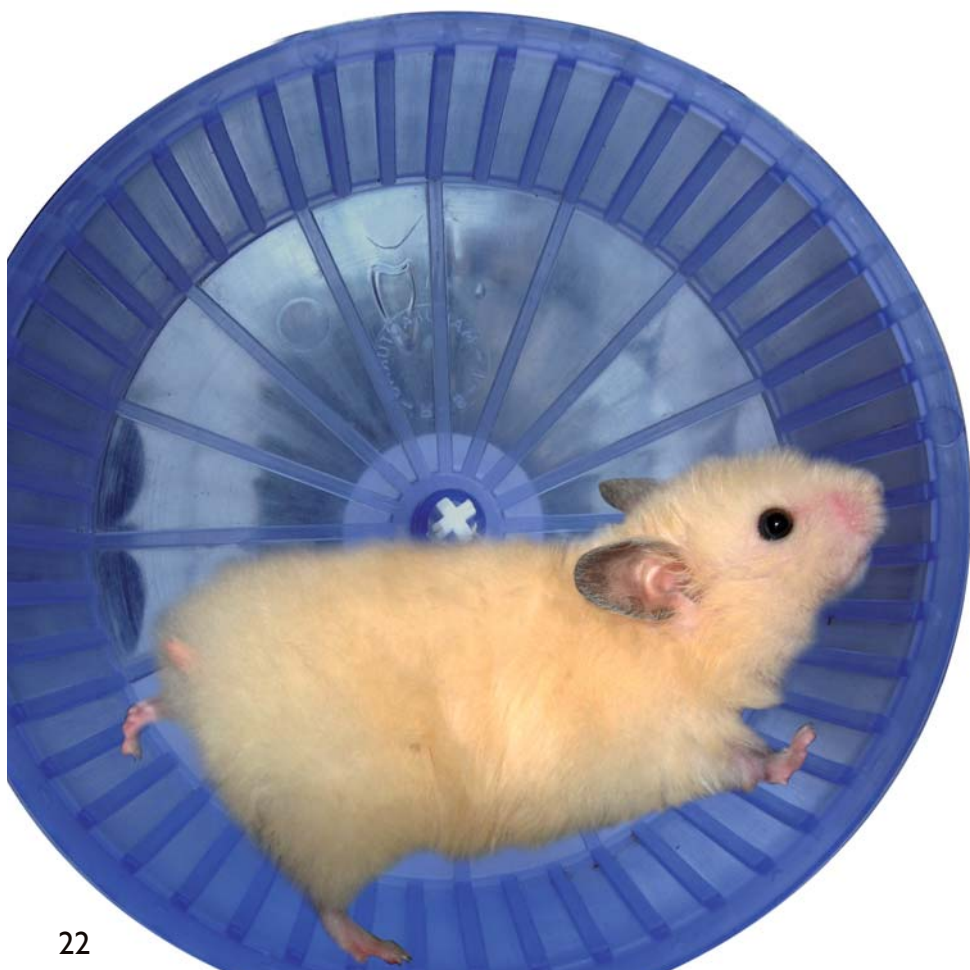


Visit www.facebook.com/GetPetsFit to find out more about the campaign, and www.pfma.org.uk/weighinwednesday for tools to check if your pet falls within the ideal weight range and tips to maintain a sensible feeding and exercise routine.

Conclusion



Pet obesity continues to be a concern, with vets reporting that up to three quarters of all pets they see are over their ideal weight. Britain's pet industry must unite in its attempt to raise awareness of this important issue and how it can be prevented. PFMA will continue to work with its members, vets and other pet-lovers across the UK in the drive to rid the nation of pet obesity. By supporting pet owners in providing pets with optimum nutrition and exercise to maintain ideal weight, we can make a big difference.



Tips for managing pet weight

1. Don't guess

Check pet food package guidelines to determine how much you should be feeding. Contact the pet food manufacturer for more information, or speak to your local vet.

2. Remember guidelines are just that

You may need to tweak food and exercise routines according to an individual pet's needs.

3. Weigh out your pet's food at the start of each day

This total measured amount can then be divided into the appropriate number of meals to be fed throughout the day.

4. Treat responsibly

Prepared treats are best aligned to your pet's needs. Remember to deduct them from the overall food allowance.

5. Don't overfeed

Be aware of how much you are feeding your pet as a family. Run a rota system to keep an eye on portions and ensure treats are not doubled up.

6. Exercise your pet to suit its individual needs

The amount of exercise required will depend on a pet's age, breed and health.

7. Use a Pet Size-O-Meter

Use PFMA's Pet Size-O-Meter to help guide you toward your pet's ideal weight.

8. Regularly monitor your pet's weight

This will allow you to nip any worrying weight gain in the bud.

Download a free healthy pet starter kit from the PFMA website and take your pet to the vet for 'Weigh in Wednesday'

For further information on how to prevent pet obesity visit:

www.pfma.org.uk

www.facebook.com/GetPetsFit



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