

# Pet Obesity:

The reality in 2009



# Foreword

Our pets are our best friends, our confidantes, our companions and, on occasion, our lifelines.

I know from personal experience how important the quality and longevity of a pet's life is. The positive impact we gain from spending time with domestic animals that are close to us - including those who work with us - exercising with them and enjoying their company, is immeasurable.

It is very sad, but perhaps not surprising, that so many of us are unintentionally punishing our pets by overindulgence as a substitute for real love and affection – which sometimes has to be tough love and more care on diet and grooming than we lavish on ourselves. While the emotional bonds between owner and pet are strong and must be nurtured, our tendency to treat animals on a regular basis with foods that are not suited to them is not the right way to cultivate this relationship.

Nine out of every ten pet owners in the UK are not sufficiently concerned about their pet's weight, yet one in three in the UK is overweight - that's approximately 7 million animals.

Rather than attributing this lack of concern to uncaring owners, I believe quite the opposite.

This PFMA paper highlights the need for owners to take responsibility for our actions and to understand the consequences of kindness. It identifies the gaps that exist in owners' knowledge of the best methods of keeping their animals healthy. Above all, it provides a wake up call to us all to take note of the recommended methods of assessing their condition and to change our behaviour according to their true needs.

I have learned a great deal over the years as a proud owner of five guide dogs (and many small animals as a child) and have also learned a great deal from other charities and organisations I've been involved in, I am continuing to learn. Above all, I am only too aware that our pets deserve to eat well, to be exercised regularly and to enjoy the benefits of a healthy, happy existence in the same way that we do.

Rt Hon David Blunkett MP



# The obesity epidemic



## The problem with humans

As a nation, we have never been so fat, under exercised, over worked and over fed as we are today. Around two-thirds of the people living in England are overweight or obese. That means that being a "normal" weight is no longer normal. In the last 25 years obesity has soared by almost 400 per cent and, if things continue as they are, being fat will surpass smoking as the greatest cause of premature loss of life.

Quite simply, we are facing the worst case of human obesity in our history.

## Why is this relevant to the pet population of Great Britain?

**Obesity is equally as serious for pets as it is for humans.** The links between human obesity and pet obesity are gradually becoming better understood, however the fundamental difference is that obesity in pets is preventable. The solution is simpler and more direct than solving the problem with humans.

According to the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA), pet obesity soared by nine per cent in 2008 alone, meaning that an estimated seven million pets in the UK are overweight\* - that equates to one in three household pets.

Eric Martlew MP, Chair of the All Party Animal Welfare Group, says: "Pet obesity is a serious issue and is a rising epidemic. We are a nation of pet lovers and we should be more aware about how to look after the health of our pets. The statistics are frightening; they suggest that we are killing our pets with kindness. In essence if your pet is obese, it is your fault. Owners must seek advice about how to keep their pets at their healthy best to give them the best possible life."

Most importantly, the life expectancy of obese dogs and cats is up to two years less than that of pets of optimum weight.

As pets become overweight, their metabolism slows down causing feeding and exercising requirements to change. Aside from causing general discomfort and lethargy, excessive weight can also lead to a number of problems, each of which diminishes pets' quality of life:

- breathing difficulties with exercise
- heat intolerance
- fatigue
- gastrointestinal problems
- lowered resistance to infectious diseases, particularly viral infections
- spinal problems
- skin conditions due to the inability to groom
- straining of joints
- dental problems
- irritability, due to increased discomfort.

Fundamentally, obesity detracts from a pet's ability to play and enjoy a healthy and happy life indoors and out.

## Why are our pets obese?

**It is extremely rare for medical problems to be the cause of obesity in dogs, cats or rabbits.** There really are very few animals – like humans – who can get away with the excuse that they're 'big boned'.

For pets, as for humans, obesity occurs when energy intake exceeds energy output. However, while the cause and effect is simple, the issue is not. Our pets' natural instincts are towards food intake, whenever and whenever possible, so it is the exclusive responsibility of pet owners to manage their pets' diet and regulate their caloric intake.

Depending on what statistics you read, somewhere between 30-60 per cent of pets in the UK are overweight. In most cases it results from too many human food snacks and treats and not enough exercise. Being overweight is unhealthy for pets and can lead to a shortened life-span, heart disease, arthritis and diabetes.

## The tipping point

**Why has the crisis escalated? One of the reasons we have reached this point is that we are no longer able to recognise a healthy, ideal body shape. Our perceptions have become blurred particularly when identifying overweight body shapes.**

What we are seeing is a shift in cultural perceptions where our views of what we consider to be a healthy body shape conflict with the clinical definition of normal weight.

When asked, pet owners' perceptions of what constitutes normal weight was found to be massively blurred, with over half of cat and dog owners unable to accurately identify a 'normal' dog or cat body shape\*.

With nine in ten pet owners reported to be not at all concerned about their pet's weight and nearly eighty per cent believing that their pet is just the right weight, the discrepancy goes some way to explain the rising increase in obese pets – pet owners don't understand what normal looks like\*.

## Turning a blind eye

**Misperception presents a fundamental barrier in managing weight not only in humans but also in pets.**

"Many pet owners may believe that their pet is healthy and it could come as a shock when a professional breaks the news that their pet is in fact overweight. 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," says Dr Philippa Yam MRCVS, Senior Lecturer in Gastroenterology.

The good news is that once owners are aware that their pet is overweight - and that they are responsible for this - they often want to make a positive change. "When we talk to owners about the issue of pet obesity they are often receptive and will listen to our advice. Once the dangers are explained and they are given helpful tips they are usually willing to make positive changes", comments George Lightfoot BA VetMB MRCVS.

## The impact of socio-economic status on the nation's pets

**Pet experts at Glasgow University have recently undertaken some research into the association of socio-economic and environmental factors in connection with canine obesity in the West of Scotland.** The results emphasise that social class and educational attainment of owners are both important factors in predicting the development of canine obesity.

Owners who earned the most money were considerably less likely to have obese dogs. At the same time middle class (ABC1s) dog and cat owners were more likely to estimate that their pet was overweight compared to those in lower income brackets (C2DEs)\*.

On the other hand, owners with a lower income did not tend to feed meal time scraps and did exercise their pets regularly. The main problem was a notable lack of understanding regarding the dangers of pet obesity\*.

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*Dr Philippa Yam MRCVS, Senior Lecturer in Gastroenterology*



# Treating the real issue



Pet owners commonly believe that treating their pet like a member of the family is a good thing. But 'over-humanising' your pet can have disastrous and sometime fatal consequences.

"Owners don't intentionally behave badly towards their pets and more often than not are shocked and hurt when you explain the risks associated with their bad feeding and exercise habits. Once owners have digested the news that they have an overweight pet they want to make a positive change. In my experience, most owners actively try to make an effort to change their ways and help their animal lose weight," says Brigitte Reusch, Lecturer in Rabbit Medicine and Surgery, Edinburgh Vet School.

Research has found that nearly one in five cat and dog owners (18 per cent) regularly feed their pets leftovers\*. In addition, when making a choice about how much food to give their dog, cat or rabbit the majority of owners do this on a trial and error basis. Given that pets will often eat whatever food they are given, it is not surprising that pet obesity is increasing.

"Over half of the people I see have an inkling that their pet is overweight, but they don't always make the connection to their diet, often blaming their pet's weight on lack of exercise as opposed to food intake," says Brigitte Reusch, Edinburgh Vet School.

Two thirds (70 per cent) of cat and dog owners admitted that the reason their pet needed to lose weight was due to too many human food treats. A lack of exercise was also cited by 70 per cent of cat and dog owners as the cause of their pet's weight problem. Most revealing from pet owners was their attitude towards managing their pet's weight. About a third of owners agreed they could be doing a lot more to keep their pet in good shape but a shocking 45 per cent and 52 per cent of dog and cat owners, respectively, claimed that their actions had little impact on their pet's weight.

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## The role of the "treat"

Treating pets with specially formulated pet treats on a daily basis is fine provided this is done as a part of nutritionally balanced diet, and is in proportion and accounted for when giving main meals.

Problems arise when pet owners treat their animal with human snacks and treats which can be higher in calories. Research from the PetFoodManufacturers' Association shows that almost half of all owners in the UK admit to treating their dog daily\*.

The guilt that an owner feels for not spending enough time with a pet or for not giving the pet enough exercise can be quickly conquered by giving human food as rewards or treats.

This is an emotive subject and one which is closely linked with the owner's relationship with food.

Many owners fail to seek advice on their pet's weight because their attitude towards treating their pet is mirrored in their own eating habits.

## Did you know that?\*

1 cookie = 1 chocolate bar  
1 slice of toast = 1 burger

1 saucer of milk = 4 chocolate bars  
1 slice of cheese = 4 burgers

\* Statistics are based on a 10kg dog, a 4.5 kg cat and an average sized woman\*\*



# Substituting food for love



## The emotional bond

**Emotional interaction between people and their pets is vital to the relationship building process.** Key to this process is owners putting effort into making time spent with pets as productive as possible in order to create a healthy and enjoyable bond. Emotional interaction can occur at various times such as at exercise, play and feeding time.

According to John Foster MRCVS, Chairman of the Pet Health Council "Pet ownership can have a really positive impact on family fitness. Dog walking or playing with a cat is a great way for people and their pets to burn a few more calories. This is particularly important when lifestyles are becoming increasingly sedentary and obesity is a growing issue for all concerned. Results of a recent survey show that on average 70 per cent of dog-owners feel instantly better as a result of walking their pet!<sup>11</sup>"

## Feeding the right diet

**Giving prepared foods takes the guesswork out of feeding pets. It is the equivalent to having a personal dietician preparing every meal.**

There are two types of pet food, complete and complementary.

Complete pet food must legally contain all the nutrients a pet needs to support its daily life. By following the feeding guidelines owners can have complete confidence that their pet is receiving just the right amount of nutritional goodness. This type of food is ideal for owners with a busy lifestyle.

Complementary pet food means that owners must add other food to their pet's diet to ensure that they receive the right combination of nutrients in a day, for example a mixer biscuit. Similarly to complete pet food, owners can easily follow the feeding guidelines on the packet/can to give them confidence that they are feeding their pet the right amount of food. This type of food is great for owners who want to tailor their pet's diet to what their animal prefers.

Pet treats can be incorporated into both a complete and complementary pet food diet. The important thing for owners to remember is that they must ensure that the volume of treats is balanced against volumes of pet food at mealtimes.

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*John Foster MRCVS,  
Chairman of the Pet  
Health Council*

**"Many cases of pet obesity are significantly related to the amount of exercise the animal is getting"**

*Donna Lewis, Vice President,  
British Veterinary Nursing  
Association*

## Walk the walk

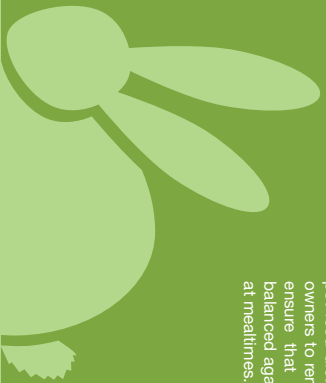
Diet is not the only factor in determining pet weight. In fact, owners who acknowledge that their pets are overweight blame lack of exercise and over indulgence on treats, as opposed to fundamental problems with their pet's diets.

Ensuring that pets are taking the right amount of exercise for their breed, size and age is crucial. Exercise not only sustains physical health, it also aids emotional wellbeing and fit and healthy pets are more likely to be relaxed and contented pets.

"Whether pets are kept indoors or outdoors there are plenty of ways of encouraging and supporting their exercise regime. Many cases of pet obesity are significantly related to the amount of exercise the animal is getting. Even if people believe their pets to be relatively fit, it is important that they are kept as active as possible for their physical wellbeing," says Donna Lewis, Vice President, British Veterinary Nursing Association. "Pet owners should seek advice on both the optimum weight for their pet and an appropriate exercise programme to maintain that weight. Exercise is absolutely vital to good health."

As a means of addressing the dual problem of obese owners and obese animals, a recent study demonstrated the effectiveness of a combined exercise programme for overweight people and pets<sup>12</sup>. Dieting dog owners have been found to lose more weight when compared to their non-pet owning peers<sup>13</sup>. "This is a clear message that a more active lifestyle for people and their pets means a big win all round," according to John Foster MRCVS, Chairman of the Pet Health Council.

The Pet Health Council has found that pet ownership can have a really positive impact on family fitness. Parents with dogs believe that since the arrival of their four-legged friend their children are less stressed and fitter. One in three dog owners say that they and their family visit their local park more frequently since the arrival of their canine companion and 22 per cent now choose to walk the dog, rather than use their car, as they run errands such as taking their children to school<sup>14</sup>.



# The heart of the issue



It has been proven that not only is chronic disease delayed in pets who are of optimum weight but preventing pets from becoming obese can also extend their lives. A 14 year study has shown that dogs fed to lean condition from early puppyhood throughout life can enjoy up to 2 more healthy, active years<sup>15</sup>.

Recent research has indicated a link between excess body weight and disease. Fat tissue has been discovered to be an active producer of many hormones. Amongst these are inflammatory hormones which have been proven to play a role in the onset of chronic diseases such as osteoarthritis, cardiovascular disease and diabetes<sup>16</sup>.

## Arthritis

**The link between arthritis and obesity in pets works in two ways: firstly, pressure on the joints is increased by carrying additional weight thereby causing pain and discomfort.**

On the other side, obesity may be symptomatic in dogs, cats and rabbits with existing joint problems. Both aspects of the disease cause suffering to the animals and can be relieved by loss of weight, which can in turn prevent further associated problems.

## Diabetes

Diabetes is becoming increasingly common in pets and weight is considered to be very closely linked to the condition in dogs and cats in particular.

Cats are four times more likely to develop Type 2 Diabetes if they are obese<sup>17</sup>, and 40 per cent of animals diagnosed with NIDDM (type 2 diabetes) are obese. Excess weight is a factor in reducing the response of the body's cells to insulin – a condition known as 'insulin sensitivity'.

Weight gain is known to reduce insulin sensitivity, thereby increasing the amount of insulin needed to move the required amount of glucose into the body's cells to keep it functioning normally. The mammalian body's response to this is to try to increase the production of insulin, putting added pressure on the pancreas to produce it and resulting in extremely high blood sugar levels, eventually causing illness.

Diabetes is a life-long illness with many associated complications, including liver and kidney disease, urinary tract infections and diabetic cataracts. It is not curable and requires regular treatment to keep the disease under control.



## Heart Disease

Heart disease affects an estimated 15 per cent of dogs in the UK, making it the second most common cause of death after cancer<sup>18</sup>. While the link between obesity and heart disease is not so prevalent in cats, obese rabbits frequently develop high resting heart rates, high blood pressure and heart disease as a consequence of their obesity<sup>19</sup>.

## Financial implications of obesity

**Pet ownership costs, like many costs, have risen over the past year.** Clearly there are fixed costs involved in pet ownership, however there are measures that can be taken to reduce expenditure on pets' health and maintaining a pet's optimum weight is one of them. Complications caused by being overweight, from joint problems to more serious conditions, are the most common reasons for pets needing medical treatment. The annual cost of vet's bills is around £1.5bn in the UK<sup>20</sup>.

## Insurance

One important cost of pet ownership nowadays is the provision of insurance. It is estimated that half of all pet owners in the UK now have pet insurance policies, meaning that approximately 13.5 million pets are covered<sup>21</sup>.

While pet insurance can be a complex area, the issues are further complicated by the surge in obese pets. Obesity-related claims have risen by 60 per cent over the past five years. The knock-on effect of this is that insurance companies – both in the UK and overseas – are moving towards creating exclusions for obese pets, just as their actuarial peers have done for human health insurance. Pet owners who have allowed animals to become heavily overweight may soon be challenged on clauses in their policies requiring them to exercise 'reasonable care' over pets. It has been suggested also that pet insurers could start cutting payouts as a penalty where pets are obese<sup>22</sup>.

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# Pet Size-O-Meter

## Size-O-Meter Score:

### Characteristics:

**1** Very Thin

More than 20% below ideal body weight



- Ribs, spine & hip bones are very easily seen in strict normal post
- Protruding 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 visible
- Obvious waist
- Very little belly fat

**3** Ideal

Between 10-20% below ideal body weight



- 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 are extremely difficult to feel under protruding fat
- No waist can be seen
- No tail fat pads on lower back and legs and an obvious sagging belly - skin folds may stick from back to side when walking

Your pet is a healthy weight. Some indicate your pet's weight. Most indicate your pet could be at risk.

**Please note:** Changes in the amount of subcutaneous fat that may occur with age are not indicative of weight. For example, a dog's ribs may be difficult to feel due to the amount of fat that has accumulated over time. If you are unsure, please consult your veterinarian. The Pet Size-O-Meter is a tool to help you understand your pet's weight. It is not a substitute for a professional veterinary assessment. The Pet Size-O-Meter is a tool to help you understand your pet's weight. It is not a substitute for a professional veterinary assessment. The Pet Size-O-Meter is a tool to help you understand your pet's weight. It is not a substitute for a professional veterinary assessment.



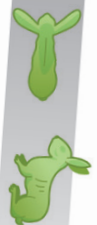
# Pet Size-O-Meter

## 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

Between 10-20% below ideal body weight



- Hip bones, ribs and spine easily felt but are rounded
- Not sharp - ribs feel like a pocket full of pearls
- 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 begins
- 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 protruding
- Pump bulges out

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# Top five tips on managing a pet's weight

## 1. Don't 'wing it', read the instructions:

- Feed a nutritionally balanced diet and follow the recommended feeding guidelines

## 2. Treat responsibly:

- Always be responsible when feeding treats
- Reduce the size of meals accordingly

## 4. Do use the PFMA Pet Size-O-Meter

- Check your pet's weight and body condition
- Ask your vet for advice if you are unsure of anything

- Feeding guidelines have been carefully formulated but they are a guide and you may need to adjust feeding amounts depending on your pet's lifestyle

- Treats should be kept to a minimum so as not to disturb the nutritional balance of the pet food

- Monitor your pet's condition on a regular basis, for instance once a month

- Start with the recommendations on the bag and then monitor your pet's weight and body condition and make any necessary adjustments in order to ensure that your pet stays at its ideal weight

- Human foods should be avoided as they can be highly calorific and unsuitable

## 5. Do keep fit:

- Exercise is an important element of any fitness regime but remember to introduce any changes gradually and speak to your vet about any new fitness plans

## 3. 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

## Conclusion



### The key to beating the pet obesity epidemic is healthy living

With nine in ten pet owners not at all concerned about their pet's weight, the job to be done to challenge perceptions, behaviour and attitudes can not be underestimated.

As with human illness, prevention is better than cure for pets. Pet owners need to act now and not wait until their pet needs to visit the vet.

For some pets by the time they display symptoms the damage may already have been done. Rabbits have evolutionary programming to hide any signs of illness so by the time they do appear unwell, the consequences can be fatal. By regularly monitoring a pet's weight and body condition, owners can give their pet the healthy life they deserve.

Education is vital to raising awareness in the UK about pet obesity. Owners need all the support we can provide to enable their pets to lead healthy and happy lives. Guidelines as to how to keep pets fit and healthy are provided by pet food manufacturers, vets, veterinary nurses and many other pet organisations and charities, so owners have a wide choice of places to turn for information and advice.

Healthy living means eating a balanced diet, exercising everyday and socially interacting with the ones you love. This applies to both owners and pets.

Integrating healthy habits, such as exercising with your pet at least once a day, into a daily routine is a positive step in the right direction. The more we can encourage owners and pets to exercise together and to enjoy the rewards that brings, the easier such a schedule will be for owners to follow. Pets can have an incredibly positive impact on individuals and families by helping people lose weight, increasing family fitness and reducing stress levels.

At the end of the day owners have their pets' lives in their hands. They can make a positive difference to their pet's health and wellbeing today, not tomorrow or next week but now.

The first step we recommend for owners to take is to start assessing their pet's weight on a regular basis. This can be done easily by using the PFMA Pet Size-O-Meter. This is an simple, interactive tool which shows owners how to measure their pet's weight and body condition.

As an industry we continue to raise awareness of the issue of pet obesity and the ways in which we can avoid it. We will continue to drive the need for vets, retailers and all those associated with animal care to work together to bring about change.

Together we can all make a difference.

**By regularly monitoring a pet's weight and body condition, owners can give their pet the healthy life they deserve.**

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For more info  
information on how to  
prevent pet obesity visit:

[www.pfma.org.uk](http://www.pfma.org.uk)





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