

Cat, Dog Obesity Continues to Grow

New study on pet obesity suggests half of U.S. pets are now overweight or obese.

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Armed with measuring tapes and scales, veterinary professionals representing 29 states examined the waistlines of their regular patients as part of a study on pet obesity conducted by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention. The findings indicate that nearly half of the nation's cats and dogs are now overweight or obese.

"This is a serious problem," said the study's lead investigator, Dr. Ernie Ward. "What troubles me is the greater risk for high blood pressure and diabetes."

The startling fact, Ward said, was the number of obese cats. According to the study, 43 percent of dogs and 53 percent of cats were classified as overweight or obese by a veterinary healthcare provider; 10 percent of dogs and 19 percent of cats were found to be obese.

"The pet data is closely paralleling that of humans," Ward said. "We are becoming a nation of couch potatoes and lap potatoes."

The study included 704 dogs ages 1 to 17 years and 282 cats ages 1 to 21 years. Veterinarians from 98 small animal clinics collected the data on National Pet Obesity Awareness Day, Oct. 17, 2007.

A 1-to-5 Body Condition Scale was used to track whether an animal was very thin, BCS 1; underweight, BCS 2; ideal, BCS 3; overweight, BCS 4; or obese, BCS 5.

According to the association's estimates, the study suggests that as many as 32 million dogs and 46 million cats in the United States are overweight or obese. Almost 8 million dogs and 17 million cats are thought to be obese.

"Fat is biologically active tissue and an excess amount negatively impacts almost every body system," Ward said. "We're in real danger of raising an entire generation of pets that will live a shorter life expectancy than the dogs and cats we enjoyed as children."

The study also looked into pet owners' assessments of their dog's or cat's weight. The majority of pet owners understand that their pets are too heavy, with 63 percent of dog owners who have overweight canines classifying their pet correctly and 73 percent of cat owners with flabby felines stating their cat was overweight.

In order to combat pet obesity, Ward said, it must begin with bilateral communication: pet owners must ask if their furry friends are too heavy and veterinarians need to tell owners when a pet is overweight. Once that awareness is established, lifestyle changes must take effect.

For example, avoid overfeeding. Treats, Ward said, are a "silent saboteur" and can easily be replaced with healthier alternatives. For dogs, he recommends baby carrots. For cats, a pinch of salmon.

Better yet, Ward said, keep pets active by going for walks or throwing a ball around. Chances are that it's attention that they seek, he said, not a high-calorie treat.