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OBESITY IN DOGS

The second most common canine health problem, behind dental disease, has to be obesity. Obesity leads to a number of other health problems:

- Decreased life span, as much as two years
- Loss of energy
- Lameness, particularly tendinitis, cruciate ligament disease, hip arthritis
- Back problems like disc ruptures and spinal arthritis
- Skin diseases, skin fold infections with yeast and staph
- Cancer, increase in number and severity of fatty tumors.

Though simple obesity is easy to prevent in the young dog, it can be difficult to address in the older dog who can be quite persistent about the amount of food he or she thinks they ought to have.

It is not the weight of your dog in pounds that should be your first concern but the dog's physical condition. Is Fido thin, obese, or just right? This is the question that needs answering. Obesity is easy to recognize by using the ribs as a "fat scale". In the healthy dog the ribs should not be visible, but easily felt. Long haired dogs are difficult to visualize, but just by feeling you should be able to get a feel of the amount of fat on your pet. There should be just enough fat cover so that if the pet loses just a little weight the edges of the ribs become visible. Note that healthy working and hunting dogs often have so little fat that the ribs are easily seen in the last few ribs. In these cases the dog's alert behavior, glossy coat, and well defined musculature indicate a healthy animal. Along with the proper amount of rib covering, healthy pet dogs will have a "waist" behind the ribs when viewed from both above the dog and from the side.

There are some diseases that can lead to obesity and in these cases proper dietary management alone will not result in proper condition. Fairly common (a little less than 1% of all dogs) in middle age to older dogs is a problem where the thyroid does not release enough

hormones to stimulate the cells' proper metabolism. Often, a clue to this problem is recurring skin infections. Another problem that is occasionally encountered in dogs is where the adrenal glands are hyperactive, promoting obesity. The clue to this problem is excessive drinking and urinating and/or a thin hair coat. Lastly, when used over time, some medications promote obesity. This includes steroids, like prednisone, and barbituates used to prevent seizures in epileptics.

If you find your pet's ribs and waist are only a memory and the above health problems are ruled out, you should make concrete steps to correct the problem so that your pet can have a long and healthy life with you. Start by carefully considering all sources of calories in your pet's diet. Besides the amount of dog food eaten, consider the treats you give, any food your pet may steal from other pet's food bowls, and the trips to neighbors' houses. All need to be critically evaluated for their caloric impact and adjusted with a goal of losing about 1.5% of body weight a week.

If your pet is currently fed ad-lib, that is his food bowl has food in it most of the time, you should adjust his feedings down to two meals a day. The meals should be small enough for him to clean up in a short period of time, say 30 minutes to an hour, and then the bowl should be put up. Once you calculate the amount of food being fed, a rule of thumb for weight loss is to reduce the amount by about 10% and then reweigh in three or four weeks to see if you are reaching your goal. If not, you can further reduce the amount 10% at a time and repeat. If you find your dog seems to remain hungry but is not losing weight, there are weight control foods available at the store that may help with controlling appetite.

You can continue to give treats to your pet at the same frequency, but high calorie treats should be replaced with low calorie treats and offered only in small amounts. Your pet is more aware of the treat than he is the size of the gift, so keep it small. If you replace ham with low calorie dog treats you may find refusal at first, but with persistence they learn. If you have trouble saying no at the dinner table you should crate your pup away from the table while you eat. There, he can have his dinner the same time you do. Extraneous sources of food need to be removed. Speak with your neighbors. Put the cat food up where the dogs can't reach. Be creative but watchful.

Don't forget exercise can help too. Daily walks, games of fetch, or just increased time out in the yard can all help with weight loss. Most of us could use a little bit more of this too, so there is a double benefit. If, after taking all the common sense precautions you find you are not making progress, it is time to get your veterinarian involved. Most offices have accurate scales, computer programs and weight control foods that when used together can help with the most difficult obesity problem.

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