

The Skinny on Pet Diets

“Eat less and exercise.” Words we’ve all heard, you would think, ad nauseam. But if the nation’s waistlines are any indication, it’s clear that many an appetite has remained keen. And the same goes for the nation’s pets.

“About 50 percent of pets are overweight,” advises Rebecca Remillard, veterinarian and nutritionist for Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston. “And the number keeps growing.” The denial many owners maintain, says Remillard, often breaks down once clients spot a chart in her exam room. Prepared by the Purina Pet Care Center, the Body Condition System chart shows profile and overhead illustrations of dogs and cats from emaciated to grossly obese, ranked 1 to 9.

If you can feel fat around your dog’s waist, he’s slipped up to a 6, overweight. Difficulty feeling the ribs and discerning a waist? That’s a 7. For cats, a slight covering of fat on the ribs is OK, but once that fat pad appears on their lower tumbs and it gets harder to feel the ribs, it’s time to cut back on rations.

Prevention, of course, is a lot easier than dieting a fat pet, but getting a pet trim is well worthwhile. Diabetes, arthritis, and cardiovascular problems may all be associated with obesity, as can a shortened life span. So if you’re ready to battle your pet’s bulge, arm yourself with these diet tips:

- Work with your veterinarian. A checkup will rule out health problems that can cause weight gain, such as diabetes, hypothyroidism, Cushing’s disease, and other hormonal disorders. Medical expertise can also help you develop a safe and effective weight reduction program.
- Lite pet food or prescription diet? Your veterinarian can help determine which is appropriate for your pet. Lite brands may have less calories, but “They’re not designed for weight loss,” warns Remillard. “They may be all right for pets that fall into the 6 or 7 category, but for 8s and 9s, a prescription food is needed.” Such products contain less fat and have elevated levels of nutrients important to dieting animals, such as fiber to control hunger and carnitine and protein to combat muscle wasting.
- Treat your pet right. Treats should never compose more than 10 percent of a pet’s food intake. For pets on a diet, try substituting cooked or raw vegetables, low in fat and high in fiber.
- Make it a family affair. If little Bobby or Grandma is sneaking the pet table scraps, the diet is bound to fail.
- Be strong. Your pet may not know what willpower is, but you do. Resist the whining and begging.
- Exercise caution. Walks, swimming, a spirited game of drag the Stuffed Mouse or Throw the Frisbee encourage desired calorie-burning activity, but don’t push your pet beyond his safety level. Remember that overweight animals are more heat-intolerant and may also suffer orthopedic problems.
- Spayed and neutered pets need less. Dogs and cats that have been sterilized don’t contribute to the pet overpopulation problem and enjoy certain health benefits as well. But the operations do result in lowered metabolisms. Owners need to realize this and adjust the amounts they feed. Age is another, albeit more gradual, metabolism slower that owners need to guard against.
- Be skeptical of the recommended quantities on the labels of pet foods sold in supermarkets; they’re often higher than what the typical less active, indoor pet needs, says Remillard. “They’re manufactured for repeat sales based on palatability,” she says, which means more fat and calories. To prevent weight problems, she suggests dry foods fed free-choice to cats and meal fed to dogs.

Compare labels and choose a food low in fat. "One brand's 'lite' food may actually be higher in fat than another brand's regular."