

# Pet health

## *weight management*

By: Dr George Collings

One of the biggest health problems in the pet industry is over-weight and obese pets. This health issue expectedly mirrors similar health concerns in human nutrition and varies from country to country.

### The size of the problem

Some market research in Great Britain suggests that 18% to 44% of dogs were overweight or obese. In France, estimates are 20% overweight or obese dogs while the number in Australia was 33%. Some researchers state that a pet is obese if they are 15% over their ideal weight. No matter what number is predicted, the number of dogs and cats with too much weight on their body frame is too high. This extra weight will definitely compromise overall health and lead to a higher risk of diabetes mellitus, hepatic lipidosis, hypothyroidism, cancer, hypertension, hip dysplasia and many other diseases. Leaner pets will simply be healthier and live longer.

Upon market review, the number of pet products focused on weight management or reduction is surprisingly low. With the size of this problem, I would have expected many more. The products are built with higher fibre levels, lower calories, less fat, less dense foods, smaller servings or more water. Some foods and

treats offer the use of helpful nutritional components like L-Carnitine which helps increase lean, muscle mass while reducing fat mass. Clever new treats provide lower calories through the use of dispensable, highly palatable liquids that the dog licks.

### Lack of products and programmes

The important question here is why are there not more weight management products, health programmes and nutritional focus for this recognized health concern? The problem is focus. Most pet products were built to provide nutrition with 'enjoyment' or 'reward' to our pets – not health and weight control.

The lack of products or programmes forces us to raise another question: what causes the pet to become overweight or obese in the first place? The simple answer is too many calories. One very specific law of physics is 'mass will be conserved'. Mass is not destroyed. So, if you push gasoline into your car's engine it has to go somewhere. It is either burned up and the car goes faster or the engine floods and dies. With humans and animals, this simple principle holds true. If too many calories are eaten, either more comes out as waste or it is stored on the body. The only alternative is to exercise more and burn off the extra calories.

Specifically, if my Golden Retriever requires 1,100 calories per day to maintain his body weight, then I feed him the right weight of his food to provide



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that amount. Any addition of treats, chew bones, food scraps and supplements could bring 50 to 1,000 calories more each day. If it was only 50 extra calories each day, then my pet would eat 18,250 extra calories in one year or the equivalent of nearly 17 days of food. And most of these extra calories are not properly balanced. Unless I increase my dog's exercise, his weight will increase.

### Controlling the waistline

Very few pet owners understand how to control their own waistlines let alone their pets. This is a good explanation for the increase in weight management plans on television which offer support, exercise programmes and most importantly; the foods you must eat. Similar programmes have yet to come to the pet industry. Over the years, I have asked consumers what they feed their pets. The quick response is a specific pet food or multiple pet foods which are rotated. When I ask them if they feed treats, chews, bones, rawhides, supplements, scraps from the table, et cetera – the response is surprising. Many of the consumers respond as if they did not know these edibles had calories or could cause any health concern to their pet. It is evident that very few consumers know the calorie contribution of each edible product. Certainly, a nutritional regime of multiple edible products is not 'complete and balanced' like the original pet food and routinely becomes 10% to 100% more calories leading to overweight pets.

### Hurdles

Veterinarians are usually the ones telling consumers to reduce the intake of calories of their pets. The problem of weight control is difficult to prevent and more difficult to enforce. Weight control faces several hurdles:

1. Pet owners see treating and extra foods as a means to demonstrate love to their pets. It is a means to bond with their pet rather than rewarding them for a trick or function.
2. Pet owners do not know the amount of calories to feed their pets and do not judge weight factors well. Simply, a pet owner does not intuitively know that their pet is overweight or know the signs of getting overweight.
3. Many packages today are beginning to add calories per kilogram with advancing regulatory regulations or by choice of the brand. However, this is not uniform across foods and other edible products. In fact, the methods of calculating calories will vary from country to country. Even with calories provided with the product, a consumer does not know how to use this information to help in weight management.
4. Most packages have feeding instructions, but there are no regulatory standards for calculating caloric intake so most recommendations are 'guidelines' for consumers. In my review of hundreds of pet products, many of the guidelines are good, but there

are many that seem inaccurate and improperly calculated. One pet food would have suggested I feed nearly 2 ½ times the cups of food to my pet Golden Retriever than what we are currently giving which was clearly in error based on the calories in the food. Feeding guidelines on treat packages rarely advise adjusting food intake with more treats fed.

5. Another common misconception is that palatable foods cause obesity. While this sounds logical, it really ignores the control of calories eaten.
6. Weight management becomes more complicated when the pet is relatively inactive. Requirements for nutrition and specifically calories will change with activity level, age, life-stage, weather conditions, health status, et cetera and consumers should be offered support to help in these situations.

I believe the potential for product and programme innovation is high in this market segment with unique new products based upon physiological discovery or satiety controls, new calorie control methods, new exercise management programmes and specific health advice with each edible food. This area of nutrition will be a necessary focus over the next ten years in the pet product market. ■