

Tips for Using Behavioral Strategies to Improve Weight Loss in Pets

Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB
Veterinary Behavior Consultations
St. Louis, MO

Obesity in companion animals has become a serious medical problem. Data published in Australia found 33.5% of dogs were classified as overweight, whereas 7.6% were judged to be obese, findings which are likely comparable to those in the USA. The prevalence of obesity in cats appears to be similar. Overweight animals may suffer from decreased life span, orthopedic problems, metabolic diseases and loss of quality of life. Even with a plethora of weight loss diets available to them, pet owners seem unable to help their companion animals lose weight. When owners try a weight loss diet for their pet, and the pet does not lose weight, the owners may conclude the diet or your advice is ineffective. Considering the behavioral factors in weight loss will improve owner compliance, and benefit the pet with better overall health.

Health risks associated with obesity

Research has indicated several areas where animal weight may be contributory to medical disorders. Overweight dogs with hip osteoarthritis will show fewer clinical signs of lameness with an 11-18% weight loss. The median life span in dogs can be increased through caloric restriction and maintaining a lean body condition. According to Scarlett and Donoghue “heavy cats were 2.9 times as likely to be taken to veterinarians because of lameness not associated with cat bite abscesses. Obese cats were also 3.9 times as likely to develop diabetes mellitus, 2.3 times as likely to develop nonallergic skin conditions, and 4.9 times as likely to develop lameness requiring veterinary care.” Indoor confinement and diminished physical activity (often found in obesity) have also been associated with diabetes mellitus. Additionally, puppies and kittens that are overweight are more likely to become overweight adults. The decreased energy requirements in spayed and neutered individuals may be contributory to an increased risk of weight gain. Certain chronic disease conditions and medication can also contribute to excessive weight gain. Finally, obesity can lead to behavior problems if it causes pain, anxiety about food resources or competition and may even result in aggression.

Identifying the issues

The first step is gathering the pertinent information about the household routine.

Feeding behavior must be explored and key information obtained.

Ask about sources of food provided including all set meals and treats. Have the owner to measure the amount of food provided on a daily basis for one week. Learn the feeding pattern (once daily, twice daily, several small meals, free choice) and how many other animals are in the home and how are they fed?

Where and how does the pet get food? (In a bowl only, from the table, treats for coming inside etc.)? Are daily “snacks” incorporated into the diet? Who feeds the animal and is the daily routine constant? Can the pet get food from other sources? (Scavenging, raiding other pets food etc.)

Activity level

What type of daily activities does the pet engage in? Is outdoor access provided; do they take the pet for a walk? If not, why not? (time, behavior). Is covered and safe outdoor access available for cats? Do they play with their pet? If yes, what type of play and for how long? Are adequate opportunities and toys provided for enrichment and self-play?

What does the feeding and food management activity mean to the owner?

This aspect explores the bonding component of food provision and is essential to understand to meet the needs of the owner and obtain compliance

Calculate the ideal weight for the individual pet and explain the rationale for weight loss to the owner.

Tip #1: understanding the problem

A weight issue is not complicated, pet obesity results from over consumption of food provided. Yet the problem goes deeper. For many owners feeding their pet is a bonding experience associated with love and caring and special tidbits symbolizes love. Owners of overweight cats have a closer relationship with their cats and view them as substitute for human companionship when compared to owners of cats that are not overweight. Owners of overweight dogs also feel that their dogs substitute for human companionship and spend more time with their dogs during meals. Additionally, it is common for the owners of overweight dogs to interpret every need of their dog as a request for food.

Tip #2: the influence of feeding ecology on eating behavior

An understanding of normal canid feeding ecology explains why food-seeking behavior in dogs may not be hunger driven, but the natural food scavenging behavior of dogs. Wild canids will eat in the “feast or famine” mode, eating large quantities when food is available since hunting and catching prey is unreliable. Food is an important commodity and essential to life and therefore, some dogs

will ask for food even if they receive adequate daily nutrition. Even the smell or presence of food is enough to elicit this response in most dogs. Scavenging and begging behaviors are reinforced if food is received, making them more likely to occur again.

The feeding ecology of felids is different; cats are inclined to eat multiple small meals daily rather than one to two larger ones. An owner may assume that a cat that follows them into the kitchen and vocalizes is hungry, although cats vocalize for a myriad of reasons. Even rubbing behavior, a typical cat greeting behavior can be misinterpreted as food seeking.

Tip #3: recognizing the social factors in food consumption

Social factors have a profound influence on consumptive behavior in dogs and cats. Group eating in dogs may cause social facilitation of eating and an increase in food consumption. Dogs may threaten, fight or intimidate other dogs when food is being prepared and consumed, altering the consumption amount or eating pattern of other dogs. Various changes are possible for altered consumption rate; faster or slower eating rates are possible.

For felines, fighting over food resources is very rare. However, access to the food bowl may be an issue. If food bowls are not adequately provided and spaced within the home a cat may over eat or eat very quickly when the food bowl is available. These ingestion behaviors could lead to obesity, vomiting or other gastrointestinal problems. Cats generally like to eat in privacy taking prey to a secluded location for consumption and may wish to replicate this eating behavior in the home.

Tip #4: what is the goal of eating? Satiety and meeting caloric needs

Satiety is the sensation of feeling full and may or may not be noted by the pet. The goal of food consumption is meeting your caloric needs. When pets are provided diets that are either highly palatable or have high caloric density per piece they may disregard these signals and over eat. Although ideally the animal should eat to meet their caloric needs if they do not “feel” full, begging and food seeking behavior may persist.

Tip #5: understanding the learning contingencies

Within the pet-owner feeding paradigm, learning contributes greatly to the over feeding and consumption that results in obesity. Most behavior is influenced by the “if/then” relationship. If I do behavior “A” then outcome “B” occurs. The stronger the relationship is between the behavior and outcome, the more difficult it will be to change the behavior. In weight loss issues several “if/then” situations arise that may be an obstacle to success. From the pet side of the equation, the mere presence of the owner especially if they are preparing or eating food, may be a signal that food is forthcoming resulting in a classically conditioned response. For the owner, the apparent delight of the pet at receiving food is the reward for giving treats or tidbits from the table.

Tip #6: don't forget the human-animal bond

Without using food, the owner might be unaware of how to provide bonding and enrichment for their pet. Appropriate enrichment and owner-pet activities would provide another outlet other than food. Keeping dogs and cats more active encourages weight loss.

Therapeutic interventions

Other sources cover the nutritional aspects of feeding and identifying obese pets. Multiple articles and book chapters exist on the assessment of caloric need during weight loss and how to assessing the treatment response, neither of these will be included in this paper.

Addressing feeding ecology, social issues, satiety, pet-owner bonding and learning in dogs

Feeding set meals rather than free choice feeding works well for many dogs and is often recommended. Most dogs would prefer to eat at least two meals a day and feeding multiple meals may help with begging behavior. All food provided to the pet must be measured using the same measurement tool every meal. Alternately, a week's worth of meals can be set up and then dispensed at mealtime. Regularly scheduled meals will help create predictability for the pet and may reduce owner over feeding. For some dogs slowing down the rate of eating and have the dog work for their food can increase satiety and decrease begging. The best options for doing this are food-dispensing toys manufactured by companies such as Premier Pet Products, Kong and others. These must be used cautiously in a multiple dog home since fighting can occur over food dispensing toys.

If food seeking behavior and begging occur while human food is being prepared and eaten then confine the dog elsewhere during these activities. Another alternative is to use part of the daily ration as “table treats” that are given when the dog begs at the table or feed the dog during these times using a food dispensing toy or a long lasting treat. If food sharing is a large component of the human animal bond, create an acceptable food-sharing plan that includes the approved diet or some low caloric substitute such as carrots or apples. Identifying and dealing with this problem is likely to increase compliance overall. In some situations, counter surfing and garbage raiding test the owner patience. Discussions of how to keep these items away from the dog can help.

Treats are always an issue. Many dogs get treats for simply being cute or just coming inside and these can add up over the course of a day to many additional calories. Again, although we would want people to stop the treats, most realistically will not. By

calculating the number of treats given each day, then it is possible to ask the owner to break each treat in half and decrease the number of treats by 50%.

Owner and pet become conditioned to use food as a bonding exercise. Replacing this bonding exercise with another is crucial to success. Increasing exercise, bonding and play is critical. It is often assumed that a dog with a fenced yard will exercise themselves but once they are out of adolescence, this is simply not so. Therefore, the owner needs to find a way to increase activity levels. Walks are a good alternative. Appropriate control products including head halters, no-pull body harnesses and other devices address leash-walking problems. Walks do not need to be long, but should be frequent. Be sure to counsel owners that an increase in exercise does not mean that the dog can increase the intake of food.

If the dog likes to play with toys, then the owner and the dog can play fetch. Most owners do have a difficult time getting the dog to drop the ball so that the game can continue. This often can be overcome by using two objects. When the dog returns with one of them, the owner holds up the second one, and then asks the dog to “drop” and when he does they throw the new object. Other games are possible such as “hide and seek”, or even basic training or tricks to keep the pet moving.

Addressing feeding ecology, social issues, satiety, pet-owner bonding and learning in cats

The feeding ecology of a cat differs from a dog. Cats generally will eat multiple small meals a day. Cats often like privacy when they eat, so food bowls in noisy or busy locations may alter feeding patterns and lead to either under or over consumption.

The type of food and the way food is provided seems to influence weight loss in cats. A randomized single blind study in 2009 investigated the effect of dietary strategies and diet composition on feline weight loss. Cats in the study were fed different diets and mean weight loss was similar between diets. However, owners using diet C and the measuring cup recorded higher hunger scores and were more dissatisfied than those on diet A or B which were pre-packaged for each meal. Perhaps feeding pre-selected and pre-packaged amounts to cats and using high fiber can increase owner compliance and affect cat behavior.

Because social issues can have a profound effect on food consumption in cats, environmental placement of food is very important. Owners may not be aware of any social issues because often aggression between cats is not overt but rather may consist of staring, blocking and mild chasing. It often is illuminating to ask when the owner sees all the cats in one place. If that rarely occurs, then distributing resources all over the home is essential because some cats may have their movement and access to resources restricted by another cat.

Exercise and increased activity can aid in weight loss. Some cats enjoy interactive play with their owners and the use of toys can greatly enhance this activity. The addition of climbing towers and placing food bowls in out of the way places can increase activity. Some cats will use food-dispensing toys and can have at least one meal a day provided in this manner.

Making it all work

Helping owners stay the course

Owners often get discouraged because weight loss is slow, but explaining weight loss as a percentage of body weight is more successful. One pound of weight lost by a dog equals 5 pounds lost by a person. A five-pound loss can be quite significant in a 50-pound dog, yet to owners this seems like a small amount. Moreover, pet owners are often isolated from other pet owners so that opportunities to share experiences through a structured program like Project Petslimdown will help increase compliance.

Initiating appropriate follow up

Evidence exists that weight loss programs that include regular follow up improve compliance and results. Not only can follow up visits weigh the pet, but a discussion of what behaviors are troublesome and interfering with compliance is appropriate. At that time, the technician can offer alternate solutions that may help the owner keep on track with the treatment plan. Enhanced compliance can occur with pre-packaged pre measured meal amounts for the pet, the sale of food dispensing toys, play items and control devices for walking the dog.

Effective weight loss plans are achievable using the proper diet, behavioral interventions for both the owner and the pet and good coaching and follow up.

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Emotions and Weight Loss. Psychological Blocks. Tips to Overcome Barriers. If you've tried every diet and exercise plan and can't slim down, there may be a psychological block in your way. Weight loss is an uphill battle for anyone, but those dealing with emotional struggles may have a harder time reaching their goal. The first step to a healthy resolution is identifying the issue. You may find that there is more than one roadblock to address. You can find a behavioral health specialist who is skilled at treating the underlying emotional causes of overeating and weight gain. Your healthcare provider may be able to provide a referral. Pets have evolved to become acutely attuned to humans and our behavior and emotions. Dogs, for example, are able to understand many of the words we use, but they're even better at interpreting our tone of voice, body language, and gestures. And like any good human friend, a loyal dog will look into your eyes to gauge your emotional state and try to understand what you're thinking and feeling (and to work out when the next walk or treat might be coming, of course). Pets, especially dogs and cats, can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise and playfulness, and most people who lose weight end up gaining it back within a year. Here are 17 effective ways to maintain your weight loss for good. These 17 strategies might be just what you need to tip the statistics in your favor and maintain your hard-won weight loss. Why People Regain Weight. There are a few common reasons why people gain back the weight they lose.