



Pet Obesity Epidemic Fact Sheet - 2018

Nearly 100 million pets in the U.S. are overweight or obese, making weight the leading health threat to our nation’s companion animals today.

Sharp Increase in Obesity Rates

Data reported by Nationwide, the country’s largest provider of pet health insurance, indicate that pet obesity is on the rise for the seventh consecutive year.

A whopping 59% of cats and 54% of dogs in the U.S. are classified as overweight or obese, according to October 2016 research conducted by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP). For cats, 28% are overweight, and an additional 31% are “clinically obese”—more than 30% above ideal weight. For dogs, 34% are overweight and an additional 20% are obese.

These statistics reflect an alarming increase in clinical obesity in recent years. According to APOP statistics, the obesity rate for cats climbed from 22% in 2009 to the current 31% (2016). During this same time frame, the obesity rate in dogs rose from 9% in 2009 to 20% in both 2015 and 2016.

Obesity Shortens Lives

Just as in humans, excessive fat in pets increases the risk of often-preventable health conditions. In a 2018 press release, Nationwide reported the top obesity-related conditions found in dogs and cats based on 630,000 insured pets:

Most Common Obesity-Related Conditions in Dogs	Most Common Obesity-Related Conditions in Cats
1. Arthritis	1. Bladder/Urinary Tract Disease
2. Bladder/Urinary Tract Disease	2. Chronic Kidney Disease
3. Liver Disease	3. Diabetes
4. Low Thyroid Hormone Production	4. Asthma
5. Torn Knee Ligaments	5. Liver Disease
6. Diabetes	6. Arthritis
7. Diseased Disc in the Spine	7. High Blood Pressure
8. Chronic Kidney Disease	8. Heart Failure
9. Heart Failure	9. Gall Bladder Disorder
10. High Blood Pressure	10. Immobility of Spine

Additionally, pet obesity has been linked with chronic inflammation and many forms of cancer. Obesity-related medical conditions decrease quality of life and may reduce life expectancy as much as two years.

APOP survey data bear this out, showing obesity to be most common in young adult/early-senior-aged pets, with incidence decreasing as pets age. **Ultimately, obese pets tend to live shorter lives with more medical problems.**

Financial Costs of Obesity

In addition to taking a heavy toll on the health and well-being of pets, obesity brings a high monetary price tag, costing pet parents millions in avoidable medical costs. As an example, Nationwide recently reported 2016 statistics, shown in the table below. Keep in mind that these numbers reflect data from one insurer only—costs from other insurers and for the large number of uninsured pets are not included.

Financial Costs of Pet Obesity (2016)		
1.4 Million Claims for Obesity-Related Conditions		
A Total of More Than \$62 Million in Veterinary Expenses for These Claims		
Percentage Increase from the Prior 4 Years: 24%		
Most Common Claims and Costs		
Arthritis in Dogs	51,000 claims	\$310 average treatment fee per dog
Bladder or Urinary Tract Disease in Cats	5,000 claims	\$443 average treatment fee per cat

Move to Classify Pet Obesity as a Disease/Updated Weight Management Guidelines

In human medicine, the American Medical Association (AMA) officially classified obesity as a disease in 2013, underscoring the complex and serious nature of this condition.

Similarly, members of the APOP are working with veterinary nutritionists and other experts to prepare a proposal to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) requesting disease classification status for pet obesity. This includes steps to define pet obesity from a clinical point of view and standardize pet body condition scoring.

Additionally, the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) published updated weight management guidelines for dogs and cats in 2014. This document highlights the negative health consequences of excess weight in pets and provides guidelines to help implement successful weight management programs.

As with human medicine, these recent initiatives may serve to raise awareness and acceptance among both veterinarians and pet parents of the pressing need to better identify, treat, and prevent pet obesity.

Causes of Obesity

Multiple factors have been implicated as causes of the current pet obesity epidemic, including:

- Lack of awareness. With obesity becoming so common in both humans and pets, pet parents don't always recognize excessive weight in their pets. As a result, action steps to control portions and reduce pet weight may be delayed.
- Lack of compliance. It is often difficult for pet parents to comply with portion control or weight maintenance programs, particularly in multi-pet homes.
- Genetic components, susceptibilities within certain breeds, single-gene mutations, and neuroendocrine pathways in terms of responses to food.
- Overfeeding through unmeasured feeding, free feeding, and food stealing.
- Feeding of high-calorie foods/treats and table scraps.
- Feeding for emotional reasons—showing love for the pet through extra feeding or by using food treats as frequent rewards.
- Lack of adequate exercise in proportion to calories consumed.



Controlling and Preventing Obesity

Steps that veterinarian/pet parent partners can take to prevent or reverse pet obesity:

- Schedule annual pet wellness exams with veterinarians to assess overall health, monitor weight, and establish optimal dietary programs to maintain or reduce weight.
- Begin healthy weight maintenance at spay/neuter.
- **Maintain a consistent diet by controlling the amount of food given to each pet. Restrict calories (portion control) as part of the veterinarian-prescribed feeding protocol.**
- Avoid feeding table scraps and regulate treats given.
- Establish a regular and fun exercise routine.
- Replace food treats with more interactive activities, such as extra play time or holding and petting.

Resources

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