

Obesity in Dogs



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Summary of Content

Like humans, overweight dogs are at risk for developing health problems and do not generally live as long as dogs that are of a healthy weight. In addition to being at a greater risk for heart disease, overweight dogs show greater incidences of arthritis, circulatory problems, pancreatic disorders, liver disease, and more.

Severity:

Severity is mild to severe

- Requires a diagnosis by a veterinarian
 - Resolves within months to years
 - Treatable by a veterinarian, by the pet parent
 - Feed a quality diet, limit snacks and treats and follow a regular exercise regimen
 - Transmission is not possible between animals or animals to people
 - Diagnosis requires physical exam, lab tests
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Very common in

Some breeds are thought to have a genetic predisposition to obesity. Older dogs and sedentary dogs.

Symptoms & Signs

Obese dogs have an accrual of excess fat throughout their bodies. As a result, obese dogs may display lethargy, lameness, difficulty moving, and a decreased exercise tolerance.

[Back to top](#)

Diagnosis

The diagnosis of obesity is quite straightforward. Obese dogs have fat accumulation spread throughout their bodies. Weighing a dog is a good way to monitor weight changes over time, but it is not adequate for diagnosing obesity. A veterinarian evaluates

a dog's body condition score by feeling the layer of fat covering a dog's ribs and looking at the dog's waistline and overall appearance.

The cause of obesity, however, can be more complicated. A thorough diet and exercise history is discussed to determine if the caloric intake and expenditure is appropriate for the dog's ideal body weight. Overfeeding, including offering too many table scraps or treats, is a common cause of obesity. However, certain medical conditions can cause obesity in dogs, and any dog with a weight problem should be examined by a veterinarian prior to initiating a weight control program. Blood testing is often recommended for obese dogs prior to starting a weight reduction program. Ongoing health problems can make it extremely difficult for a dog to lose weight until any medical conditions are treated. Depending on the health problems suspected, a veterinarian may recommend a complete blood count, blood chemistry, a thyroid panel, or a low dose dexamethasone suppression test (LDDST, to diagnose Cushing's disease).

[Back to top](#)

Causation

Dogs may become overweight for many reasons. Whether the obesity is due to simple overfeeding or a result of a disease process, the bottom line is the same: the dog is taking in more calories than they are using. Regardless of the cause of obesity, the pet owner is ultimately responsible for regulating their dog's caloric intake, ensuring they receive adequate exercise, and seeking veterinary assistance in maintaining the dog at the optimal weight. Humans are the main cause of obesity in dogs. There are some medical conditions, as well, that can lead to the onset of obesity.

Some dogs will only eat what they need and will do fine if their food is available free choice (available at all times). Others will eat as much as is available and then look for more. Some dogs are finicky and others will eat just about anything. So the amount and type of food that is fed and the eating tendencies of the dog can determine how likely it is a dog will become overweight. Similarly, the type of food offered has a direct bearing on the tendency of a dog to become overweight. Table scraps, treats, and premium high-energy dog foods can contribute to obesity.

Activity level plays a major role in determining the caloric needs of a dog and thus their tendency to become overweight. An active dog will use more calories. Additionally, an active dog's mental state may make them less likely to overeat due to boredom or stress.

Neutering and spaying dogs lowers their metabolic rate such that they require fewer calories than intact dogs. In addition to changes in metabolism, androgens and estrogens (male and female sex hormones) stimulate roaming behavior and general physical activity. Estrogen also has the effect of decreasing appetite. Since their energy needs are less, spayed and neutered dogs will gain weight if they are fed the same as intact dogs. Most neutered and spayed dogs are overfed and underexercised, and they are twice as likely to become obese as intact dogs. Neutering and spaying does not cause obesity, but owners need to be aware that feeding routines will need to change after surgery.

Dogs who live in multi-dog or even multi-pet households often tend to eat more and/or faster than those in one-dog households. The change in behavior when other animals are present is called 'social facilitation.' The competition for food, whether perceived or actual, makes some dogs much more focused on their food and can lead to obesity.

Various medications can influence metabolism and appetite. These include glucocorticoids such as prednisone and dexamethasone, barbiturates such as phenobarbital, and benzodiazepines, including Valium.

Medical conditions that can contribute to obesity include hypothyroidism, Cushing's Disease (hyperadrenocorticism), insulinoma, non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus (NIDDM), and pituitary disorders. They account for less than 5% of the cases of obesity in humans, and a similar proportion is likely in dogs as well.

[Back to top](#)

Treatments

- **At-home Care**

The treatment of obesity occurs at home with strict and consistent diet changes and regular exercise programs. In addition to reducing caloric intake, it is important to increase the calories used. Exercise programs will need to be tailored to the dog and should take into account the condition of the dog's muscles, joints, heart, and respiratory system. It is important to choose appropriate activities for an individual dog. Start slow and work up to higher activity levels. If signs of fatigue are observed, such as heavy panting and suddenly stopping activity, rest should be encouraged. In general, leash walking for 20-60 minutes a day, five days a week is a great way to start. Swimming is also an excellent activity for obese dogs since it places less stress on joints.

There are two basic ways to cut down on calories. One is to feed less of the food the dog is currently eating. The second is to switch to special weight loss diets, including prescription diets. Of course, with either diet option, table scraps should not be given and treats should be minimized.

When starting a weight reduction program, your veterinarian can help you determine a realistic weight goal and timeline. It is important to understand how long the process may take. In general, a good goal to aim for is 1-2% of the body weight per week. We do not want the dog to lose weight too fast, since rapid weight loss increases the likelihood the weight will come back after the weight reduction diet is stopped.

If a dog will be placed on a weight reduction program that calls for them to continue eating their current food, it is generally recommended that the amount of food fed daily be cut back by 20 to 40%. Weight reduction diets generally allow for a dog to eat their usual amount of food. Prescription weight-loss diets contain less calories per serving than over-the-counter weight loss diets.

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Supportive Care

Monitor caloric intake and limit snacks and treats. Provide regular exercise.

- Medications

If a dog is diagnosed with a medical condition which has led to obesity, then medications may be necessary to treat the disease in addition to the pet starting a weight loss plan.

- Medical Procedures

None

- Devices

None

- Surgery

None

- Specialists

General practitioner veterinarians manage weight loss plans for most obese dogs, but consultation with specialists in veterinary nutrition may be necessary in some cases.

[Back to top](#)

Cost of treatment

Treating obesity itself is fairly inexpensive. Prescription diets may cost \$50 to \$100 per month depending on the size of the dog. It is the cost of treating health conditions related to obesity that can be expensive. Cardiac disease, endocrine disease or ligament/orthopedic injuries can cost several hundred to several thousand dollars to treat.

[Back to top](#)

Recovery

It may take several months (and possibly years) of consistently following a weight loss plan to achieve an ideal weight. Generally, a dog should lose 1-2% of its body weight each week. Remember, exercise and attention to caloric intake needs to continue after the weight is lost or pounds will start to accumulate again.

Monitoring

Frequent physical exams and weigh-ins are crucial in tracking a dog's progress. Keep a written log of food intake (including all treats), exercise, and weekly weight. Once the dog has reached an ideal weight, frequent monitoring is needed to make sure they are maintaining that weight.

[Back to top](#)

Prevention

Maintaining a healthy body weight from day one is much easier than working on a weight reduction plan. Dogs should be fed good quality, balanced diets in proper portion-controlled volumes using actual measuring cups to assure that a consistent volume of food is offered. Maintaining a regular exercise routine is also necessary.

[Back to top](#)

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