



As a Matter of Fat

Like their human counterparts, the number one disease affecting pets in the U.S. is . . . do you know? Shhhhhhh. You don't want to affect their self-esteem, do you? We certainly wouldn't want to be politically incorrect and cause another discomfort, would we? The terms we try to use to euphemistically gloss over the facts are often cute, or at the very least not insulting: pudgy, comes to mind. What we are talking about, though, is not cute; it is a serious and debilitating condition that can lead to a myriad of illnesses, many of which can even be life-threatening. What is the disease? **OBESITY!** There just is no other way to spell it or say it without decreasing the importance of what it is.

Now, I know your pet is not strutting in front of full-length mirrors wondering if next season will be a bikini or another one-piece, so appearance is not what we are talking about. I also know that with rare exceptions, this overly round little fuzzball isn't doling out his or her own portions either. And interestingly enough, while pets of overweight people often *are* overweight, an equal number of my obese patients belong to those who take the steps necessary to ensure their own weight is healthy. Vicariously cheating through your dog, I suppose.

Let's talk about what obesity causes before we look at how to avoid it. Finally, I'll suggest some things to do if you suspect your pet is already showing signs of overindulgence (by you, I might add!!!).

The most telling and often tragic sequel to a lifetime of excessive weight is often the irreversible destruction of joint cartilage. What does that mean? It means arthritis. And while modern medicine has gotten pretty good at relieving discomfort, and even come up with long term solutions to help repair damaged cartilage, prevention through weight management could have led to a more comfortable "senior" life. In addition to limb arthritis, spinal problems are equally painful and debilitating.

Heart disease and diabetes are most frequently seen in overweight to obese animals. Both are potentially devastating. While dogs and cats do not get coronary artery disease, and while cholesterol does not seem to impact them as it does us (probably because they don't live long enough to be affected by it), talk to the owner of any pet in congestive heart failure and they will tell you they wish they had stopped overfeeding their pets eons ago. With diabetes, the need in most cases for continued administration of insulin by injection, given by the *owners*, serves as a daily reminder of the bad habits that started in puppyhood or kittenhood.

In this day and age, it should not be necessary to preach the importance of good dietary habits as we are surrounded by the results of the impact of fast food on the health of our nation. But when one considers that liver disease, pancreatic disease, gastrointestinal disease, and several forms of cancer have their origin in poor nutrition, excessive calories, or excessive fat intake coupled with decreased fiber and antioxidants, it is surprising that more people don't use the same cautions when applied to their pets that they might for themselves.

What can we do about obesity in our pets? Frankly, get their heads out of their bowls and get their paws moving. Realistically, this means smaller portions and more exercise. In practice, there are many possible ways to accomplish the former. Most quality pet food companies make "diet" food listed as either "light," "lite," "less active," "for horizontally challenged," or several other nice ways of saying less calories. The hook, though, is that if you follow the feeding guidelines on the package, weight loss will be slow in coming if at all. Reducing the recommendations by about 20 % will often get the job done. But don't stop there ! You know, when you're sitting around watching TV and little Chubster is staring you down for the several potato chips you usually "accidentally" drop. The old one for me and one for you routine? Stop it! Try giving a baby carrot if you have to give *something*. In fact, you should probably try one for yourself, since you're already on the couch doing nothing and eating potato chips. Then you both should go out for a nice walk.

I mentioned earlier I would tell you how to avoid the tragic consequences of obesity by preventing it. It's easy. Put a measured amount of good quality food in the bowl the appropriate number of times per day, and find another way to show your love for that adorable little critter. Remember, your pet can't regulate how much food they eat, only you can. And you may be gambling with the length of time you will be together if you decide to ignore the epidemic of obese pets, and open another can.