

Dr. Roughie's Questions and Answers

Obesity Stories

Kasmin D. Bittle DVM

It is estimated that 35 to 45 percent of dogs and cats in the United States are overweight. As food manufacturers and pet owners argue vehemently over which food is best, which proteins are best, which preservatives are safest, and whether “fresh and natural” is better than processed, a large percentage of the animal population is being overfed, rather than undernourished. The problem with obesity is not confined to the pet population. I have frequently seen animals competing in conformation, obedience, and in veteran's classes carrying far more weight than is healthy. We see Labrador Retrievers that could sink the Titanic and working hounds that would be fortunate to outrun the food dish, much less the hare. Several animals in my practice have recently paid the price for their owners' dietary mismanagement, and to these animals I dedicate this discussion.

Millie is a Basset Hound owned by a good friend. To my friend's credit, Millie was adopted from my animal hospital after being “dumped” following an unplanned litter. When Millie left our hospital, she weighed an ideal 35 pounds. Please note that this was Millie's ideal weight, not necessarily the ideal weight seen in the breed standard, as Millie was much smaller in stature than the typical Basset seen in the show ring. Millie's weight increased to 45 pounds within months of her adoption from our hospital. In spite of repeated admonishments from me, and in spite of her nurse owner's awareness of the Basset's propensity toward intervertebral disc disease, the owner seemed incapable of restricting Millie's calories to achieve a more normal weight. She often bragged of their mutual couch potato lifestyle. One bout of pancreatitis and several episodes of disc pain, unassociated with paralysis, were also insufficient to convince the owner of the dog's endangerment. The owner began to request that I give her vaccines at her home, in great part, I believe, to avoid putting her on the inevitable scale at the hospital. Millie's owner contacted me crying at six in the morning a few weeks ago and tearfully reported that Millie had “gone down” in the rear legs. To my great relief, when Millie was evaluated at the clinic, she had vigorous voluntary movement in her limbs and good control of her urinary bladder. Joyfully, I reported that Millie was a good candidate for disc surgery, only to be told that her owners had already discussed it and could not afford it. The owners were informed that if Millie's neurologic status remained stable over the next 72 hours, that with weight loss and good nursing care, she still had a reasonable chance for partial or complete neurologic recovery. Millie proved to be an extremely cooperative

patient at our hospital, and readily and cheerfully adapted to the slinging and support of her rear quarters during exercise periods to relieve herself outdoors. After five days in the hospital, Millie was discharged to the owner's care with instructions on helping her with the sling. After 24 hours at home, Millie's owner again called in tears saying that with the arthritis in her hands, she was incapable of slinging Millie by herself and requested euthanasia. My husband is still haunted by the fact that Millie stood in her cage as we removed her from the transport cage used to return her to the hospital for euthanasia. Millie was 10 years old and otherwise in good health. When I observe my nine-year-old matriarch PBGV trotting proudly in her yard and running with the pack weighing very close to her show weight at three years of age, I think of what could have been for Millie. She is living proof that age is no excuse.

Baron is a neutered male Rottweiler born in 1998. Baron was last examined at our hospital in the spring of 2000, at which time he was characterized as obese at 123 pounds. At that time, weight management was discussed with his owners and weight reduction was strongly encouraged. Baron was presented to our hospital earlier this week barely able to walk and only able to rise with assistance. His weight was now 145 pounds and clinical evaluation revealed that he had probably ruptured the cruciate ligaments in both rear legs. The owners reported that they had been feeding him more food for the last two weeks because they felt sorry for him. When informed of the need for surgery on both rear legs, and the need for a specialist because of the dog's size and the imperative to put everything in his favor for a successful surgical outcome, we were again informed that surgery was too costly. The owners cried crocodile tears and wept over their inability to afford surgery. I had to wonder, couldn't they have afforded to feed him less for the past year? Baron is only 3 years old and is facing a death sentence because his owners fed him too much. Did they love Baron enough to cry for him, while not loving him enough to restrict his diet for his own welfare?

Perhaps as I shed a tear for Baron and Millie, I should tell the story of Blanca. Blanca is a nine-year-old Staffordshire Terrier that until the past year had been morbidly obese for as long as I had known her. In addition to suffering from hip dysplasia, Blanca had a seizure disorder that required anticonvulsants, and liver dysfunction that prevented the use of the newer nonsteroidal drugs that have helped so many arthritis patients. On each visit to our hospital, usually for anticonvulsant drug monitoring, the owners requested medications for Blanca's arthritis. They were repeatedly told that weight loss would benefit her far more than arthritis medications would and more safely. The owners were unsuccessful in their attempts to reduce her weight until last year. Last winter, similar to Baron,

Blanca's cruciate ligament in one rear leg failed. Because of her hip dysplasia and her weight, she was unable to walk or rise without assistance. Fortunately for Blanca, her owners were able to afford orthopedic surgery. The cost of surgery followed by the difficult recuperative period seemed to shock her owners into action. Now suddenly, on the same prescription reducing diet that had seemed to fail before, Blanca was losing weight rapidly. In fact, so rapidly and profoundly did she lose weight that at one point we had to withdraw anticonvulsants completely to allow her blood levels to fall to a safe range. Blanca now has a waistline, is more active than she has been in years, and is taking only 50 percent of the anticonvulsant dosage that she was on prior to her orthopedic surgery. Also of great interest, she has not had a single epileptic seizure in the past year, whereas before her weight loss she was frequently plagued with breakthrough seizures. Blanca's owners are in their seventies, and I am still amazed at their dedication in slinging and supporting her as she recovered from surgery.

I have often envied my animals in that their feeding decisions are made for them. They suffer no guilt over the dessert after dinner last night, and no choices about whether to go for the steak or the salad. Animal stewardship is all about making the right choices for our animals. Just as we would not allow our children to live on colas and french fries, we should not allow ourselves the instant gratification of overfeeding our pets in the name of love while denying them the opportunity to do the doggy things they were born to do — chase a squirrel, run like the wind and rough and tumble about with their favorite playmate. In making the right choices, we too benefit from the added years of their unquestioning loyalty. Please, if your pet is seriously overweight do something about it now. Do it for Millie and Baron.

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Tips for Weight Management

1. First learn to judge ideal weight by feel. Ideal weight is when the ribs on either side of the dog are felt easily in the standing position but are not prominent. Ideal weight should never be based upon breed average. Ideal weight is ideal for the individual, not for the breed.
2. Spaying and neutering decrease caloric requirements, on average, twenty to thirty percent. Remember to decrease calories accordingly after the animal has been spayed or neutered.
3. Obesity occurs only when calorie intake exceeds calorie utilization. I find that my clients are rarely successful at reducing their pet's weight by increasing

their activity level. Higher success is achieved by reducing caloric intake, rather than increasing activity level. A higher activity level is more often the result of weight loss rather than the cause of weight loss in the overweight pet. The only exception to this, in my experience, is in working breeds where the work is seasonal. A good example of this is the dog that is actively hunted in the winter and fall, and rested in the spring and summer. Calories must be adjusted for the seasonal difference in activity in this instance.

4. Never assume your pet is losing weight just because he or she appears to be. Put the animal on the scale at least monthly to confirm your impressions. If the animal is on a prescription weight loss diet, weigh-ins are recommended every two weeks.
5. Although weight may be reduced by feeding almost any food in restricted quantities, it is often faster and safer to reduce animals' weights using prescription weight loss diets under veterinary supervision. In my experience, these diets improve success rates and facilitate more rapid correction of severe obesity.
6. The entire family must participate in weight reduction efforts. One "cheater" can upset the apple cart. Convince the entire family that safely reducing the animal's diet is the right thing to do.
7. Don't use the excuse, "He won't eat it!" Otherwise healthy animals don't starve themselves. Catering to the appetite is often how the animal got in trouble to begin with.
8. Test for hypothyroidism if there is reason to suspect it, but keep in mind that overfeeding is a much more common cause of obesity than hypothyroidism. If testing for hypothyroidism, select a laboratory that can perform free T4, preferably by equilibrium dialysis, and TSH levels as a minimum.
9. Weight loss in breeding animals should be achieved before breeding, not during pregnancy. Obese animals have a higher frequency of delivery complications.
10. Measure food intake daily. If your animal becomes overweight on two cups of food per day, then the amount must be decreased or the caloric density of the food must be decreased. But if you don't measure, caloric density becomes irrelevant. Animals who are free fed "light" foods are often overweight.