

The growing problem of canine obesity: approaching the owner

Olga Gibbs VN, Sales Manager for Royal Canin in Ireland, looks at obesity in pets.



Obesity in the pet population is quite literally a growing problem. With estimates in western Europe of up to 45% of pets being overweight, and up to 30% obese, it is a problem all practices are facing. With that in mind, we look specifically at the role of the veterinary professional in working with the owner to tackle this issue.

Obesity is simply the result of too much energy taken in, in the form of food, compared with the amount of energy expended by the animal. However, we know that dogs don't feed themselves! Most often, the root cause of a pet's weight gain lies with the owner and there too lies the path to a successful weight loss regimen.

As they consider their dog to be part of the family, many owners have a tendency to use food to express affection for the dog. However, food has a different significance for dogs and, in the belief that they are pleasing their pet, owners make behavioural mistakes which contribute to the development of canine obesity. Whether the veterinary surgeon and his or her team are helping a dog either lose weight or remain at his ideal weight, changing the owner's behaviour is a priority. Obesity develops slowly and

insidiously, so much so that most owners aren't even aware of it creeping up. It is always difficult to treat, because it stems from a lack of balance over a long period of time, making it essential that owners are encouraged to prevent it. The nurse's role in particular, and their ability to motivate the owner, is often a decisive factor in the success of a weight loss regime where that becomes necessary.

The first thing is to identify that a dog is actually overweight. Often we can clearly see that the animal is overweight, we can resort to scales and breed weight charts or we can use a body condition score chart (**Figure 1**). The latter option is a helpful device to use with the owner – they can then clearly feel that their pet is overweight. It is also a particularly helpful tool when faced with an overweight owner, diverting all attention specifically to the pet.

So, having established that the pet is overweight, the next thing to do is to inform the owner. The term obese can sound critical to some owners but they should understand that it is in fact a real disease. The owner might find it easier to hear that his dog is 'overweight' or 'a bit plump', but whatever terminology is used it is vitally important is that the owner understands the consequences of the condition.

Obesity is a real pathological state, as it leads to a reduction of the animal's physical abilities, increased level of associated diseases and, often, locomotor pain. What is worse is that this is a condition that the animal cannot control itself, because it cannot reduce its own food intake. This is why it is very important that the practice helps to make owners aware very early on if their dog is overweight or obese and motivate them to take action.

Motivating the owner

The owner's motivation is essential to the success of a weight loss regime. There are several well identified stages that the owner has to go through (**Figure 2**). To strengthen the owner's motivation to put his or her pet on a diet, the veterinary surgeon or nurse must adapt their attitude to each psychological hurdle.

1 Precontemplation

The owner doesn't yet believe that their dog is overweight, or if they knows he doesn't consider it to be a problem: "It's normal to put on a pound or two in the winter", "He's castrated", "He's a Labrador", "He needs it, he's a guard dog".

This phase will last until the owner becomes aware of the problem.

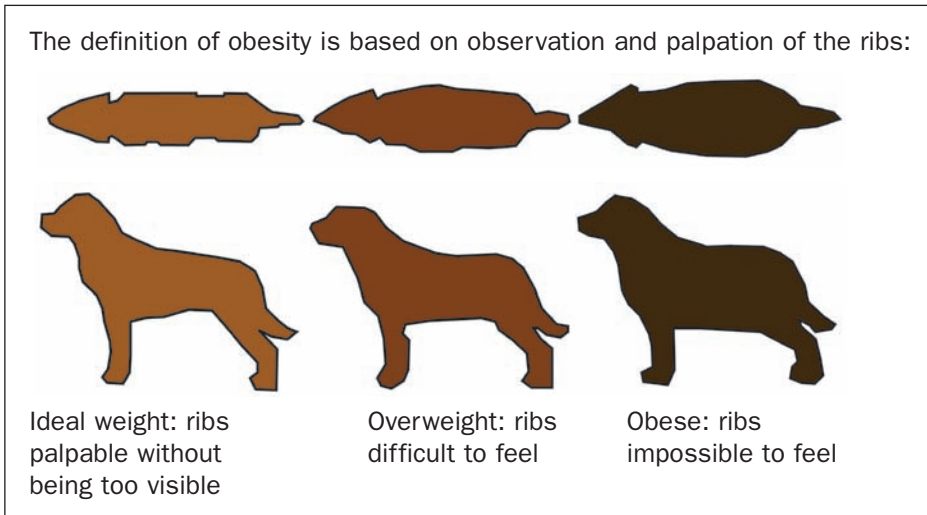


Figure 1: Identifying whether a dog is overweight or not using a body condition chart.

Ways to motivate the owner:

- Confirm that there is a weight problem, underline its seriousness and possible consequences.
- Comment on weight gain (“Tina has really broadened out since her last visit, she must get tired much more quickly”).
- Ask the owner to identify the silhouette matching his dog: compare and contrast this with the ideal silhouette.
- Ask him if he has noticed a change in the dog’s activity.
- Ask him to compare his dog to other dogs.
- Compare the dog’s weight against the last visit: express the difference as a percentage (“Rex has gained 3 kg in two months: he’s 20% bigger than he was”) and give a human equivalent (“It’s as if you had gained 13 kg!”)
- Ask the owner to describe precisely what the dog eats.

Ways to motivate the owner:

- Confirm the owner’s belief that obesity is harmful, and that a change would be beneficial to his dog. Don’t try to respond to objections point by point (don’t play ‘ping pong’!), and remain positive.
- Describe the medical consequences of obesity (use drawings, photos etc.).
- Compare obesity to smoking (current wellbeing, but future risks).
- Identify the consequences of obesity in a way the owner can understand (limiting sporting activity, cardiac risk etc.).
- Compare obesity in the dog with obesity in man.
- Ensure that there is a consultation on the possible medical causes.

2 Contemplation

The owner is aware of the problem and thinks about it carefully, but can back out at any minute: “My dog is happy like this”, “My last dog was big and lived for a long time”, “It’s not the same as it is for us”.

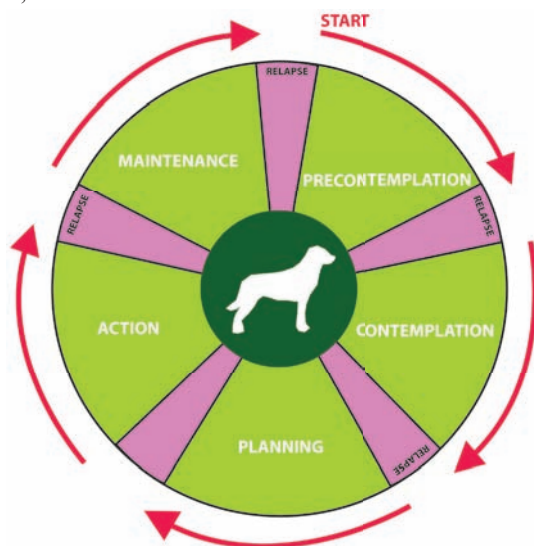


Figure 2: The motivation cycle. Don’t move on to the next stage until the previous one is well-established (for example, it is no good praising the benefits of a diet food to an owner who is still in the ‘pre-contemplation’ or ‘contemplation’ stage).

3 Getting ready to change

The owner is ready to consider the solution, but is still resistant to the idea: “He won’t like the food”, “He will be unhappy”, “I’ve got two dogs”. What are required at this stage are easy changes for the owner to put in place. Faced with objections, you must show the owner that the suggestions are achievable.

Ways to motivate the owner:

- Let them know that the changes are realistic: the diet is palatable and limits the sensation of hunger.
- Show that proceeding in stages makes the change easier (remind the owner that the objective, planning and methods are very precise).
- Demonstrate that rewards can still be given (taken from the ration) and games and petting can replace them for the better.

4 Action

The owner has committed himself to the slimming regime. This is the most difficult phase, because it demands plenty of discipline and time. The owner can often be tempted to stop completely (“My dog is unhappy”) and must be given regular support. Reassure the owner and let them know that they will not be held responsible for any possible setbacks.

Ways to motivate the owner:

- Reassure him/her that failure is a potential outcome.
- Point out that there will be obstacles (e.g., a dog normally fed highly palatable foods may reject some weight control diets but will adapt).
- Remind him/her of the objectives set by the practitioner (1-3% weight loss per week) and the timeframe envisaged to achieve ideal weight, because a precise deadline boosts motivation.
- Check that he/she understands the rewards allowed.
- Emphasise the importance of games and walks.
- Show photos of a dog at ideal weight.
- Take photos of the dog and record progress.
- Offer motivational phone calls.
- Fix regular meetings to control weight development.
- Never criticise or ridicule any setback.
- Congratulate even the smallest weight loss.
- Keep on the lookout for signals that the owner is in difficulty, so he can be motivated with a consultation when necessary.

5 Maintenance

The process of weight reduction must be maintained over a long period of time. Don't let owners fall back into old habits once the ideal weight has been achieved: "Hurray, it's over!". This will lead to a rapid regain of weight (the 'yo-yo' effect).

Ways to motivate the owner:

- Provide general information on possible solutions, and don't put pressure on the owner.
- Help the owner establish a new balanced way to maintain his dog's weight with a low fat or low energy food.
- Make weight maintenance, way of life and interactions with the dog a major objective for the owner (help to consolidate good behavioural practices).
- Don't forget that minor weight variations are normal in the maintenance phase.

6 Relapse

Relapse represents a step back, and is possible at each stage of the change process. This stage is generally a consequence of a weight loss programme which is too difficult, or the owner's resistance to the demands it imposes. If there is a relapse, a veterinarian or nurse needs to meet the owner as soon as possible to suggest solutions which are easier to achieve and thus easier to make acceptable. This is vital to the owner's motivation.

Weight loss – what to aim for

Understanding the owner is a major consideration in a weight loss programme for a dog, but for success so too is the owner's understanding of that weight loss process. The ideal aim for weight loss is between 1-3% per week. It is essential that this is a realistic objective (so a 10 kg animal on a diet has at least a chance of losing 100-300g per week). It is important that the owner realises this. Such a small amount may not be registering on the practice scales,

but the owner may initially become aware of behavioural changes, particularly in relation to activity levels.

At a faster rate of weight loss there is a risk of loss of lean tissue as well as an increased risk of relapse. It is recommended that any weight loss program is carried out in conjunction with daily exercise. The level of physical exercise must be increased gradually to avoid accidents (e.g., sprains).

Weight loss – what to feed

Although tempting as it may be to simply advise an owner to reduce their pet's normal ration, this is much less effective than advising a specifically designed weight loss diet. A risk of simply reducing the ration is that the dog will be hungry and constantly demand food. Also, restricting the food risks creating imbalances, in terms of vitamin and mineral content, as well as macronutrients. So, for example, failing to reach adequate protein levels may result in muscle loss. That is why it is essential to use a diet whose composition has been specially adapted, maintaining palatability but still allowing weight loss while avoiding these problems. Likewise, although it is possible to effectively manage weight loss with home prepared feeding, a perfectly balanced homemade diet food is difficult to achieve. If the owner doesn't measure quantities precisely, homemade food can be lacking essential elements or be less effective. The owner who insists on not feeding a dry diet will achieve better results with a prescribed canned diet than with a homemade diet.

Not losing weight?

What can you say to a client whose dog is not losing enough weight, despite the regime? The most important thing is to check that the owner is controlling the amount of food given and whether the advice is being followed carefully (especially in terms of treats). If, despite this, the weight loss is less than 1% per week, then it may become necessary to reduce the amount of food prescribed. Owners should also be reminded that dieting always takes a long time (several months), and not to look for a too rapid weight loss.

Conclusion

Keeping a dog at its ideal weight helps prevent many diseases, prolongs life expectancy and improves wellbeing. Over recent years, the reduction in physical activity and the rise in the number of neutered animals, have led to a major increase in weight problems, which today affect one dog in three in western Europe! Obesity is like many clinical conditions, prevention is better than cure, but for those animals that do need help the veterinary practice now has the opportunity to develop a new service for their clients to ensure their pets remain healthy, happy and slim!

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