

Holistic science in veterinary medicine, animal husbandry and management

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

OBESITY IN DOGS

Vets have been warning owners about the health risks associated with overweight in dogs for years, with no apparent improvement. It is reliably estimated that over 25% of dogs in the US are overweight and the UK is not far behind that figure. The US study's results, published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, gives more weight to veterinarians' long held conviction that many owners are overfeeding their dogs.

What this research tells us is probably no surprise. As is often the case, it takes a scientific study to prove what most people would call common sense. To illustrate this - if we consider the wild wolf for a moment, which is the modern counterpart of the domestic dog – how often do you see an overweight specimen – fat wolves cannot run as fast as their prey, so nature has a built in weight governor.

Lean dogs are healthier and they live longer. Apart from clinical problems, it has been shown that a dog, which is maintained at an ideal weight, can live considerably longer than a dog that is overweight. Other healthy indicators—including body fat mass, lean body mass, bone mass and glucose, glucose and insulin use, and cholesterol and triglyceride levels—are also properly maintained. Other observations are that overweight dogs appear to show earlier visible signs of ageing, such as greying muzzles, stiffened gaits, and reduced activity.

Here are some physical problems directly associated with overweight.

- Diabetes - Diabetes is much more common in overweight dogs
- Heat Intolerance – fat is a good insulator so overweight animals are more uncomfortable during hot weather
- Heart and Respiratory Disease – The heart and lungs have to work harder to provide adequate oxygen and circulation if the animal is overweight. Extra fat in the chest cavity and around the heart muscle can decrease the efficiency of the respiratory system.

- Joint or locomotion difficulties - Extra weight puts added stress on joints, bones, ligaments and muscles. Conditions such as arthritis, hip dysplasia, back problems and ligament ruptures.
- Liver Disease – Overweight animals are more prone to liver disease.
- Pancreatitis – Is often seen in overweight dogs. This can be a life threatening condition.
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- Skin Problems – Overweight animals are less able to groom themselves properly and this leads to associated skin problems caused by the build up of dirt and potentially harmful organisms.

IS MY DOG OVERWEIGHT?

It is of course a question of degree. The more overweight the dog becomes the more liable he is to develop associated physical problems. Whilst clinical obesity would be obvious to most owners, it sometimes needs closer examination to determine if the dog is slightly overweight. Just like people, some individuals and certain breeds naturally carry more weight than others, but don't mistake fat for muscle. Fat is soft and moves around as you feel it – muscle is solid. Big boned breeds built for endurance rather than speed will carry more weight, but this should be muscle not fat.

Here's how to tell.

It should be possible to feel the dog's ribs with flat of the palm – if not dog can probably do with losing a little weight. Another way is feel around the lower back bone area just below the rib-cage – a dog should have a 'waist'. This is usually one of the first places the body will store fat.

CAUSES OF OBESITY

Metabolic problems can cause weight gain in some dogs and this is all too often wrongly put forward as a reason for obesity; by far the most common cause of overweight in dogs is overeating combined with not enough exercise. If you feel your dog has a metabolic disorder your vet can run tests and will advise you accordingly.

The relationship between amounts of food and weight gain is simple; the general rule is that if the calories consumed exceed the calories expended during daily activities, the body will store the excess as fat. It is a mechanism designed to provide the body with a buffer in times of feast and famine. A little fat occasionally therefore is not necessarily unhealthy; it is only when the dog is constantly very overweight that there is risk of problems arising.

OVEREATING

Many dogs will constantly overeat if they are given the chance; it is part of their inherited survival instinct to cope with feast and famine. In the wild they will fill their bellies when they have the opportunity to do so, then go and sleep it off for an hour or two. The next few days though there may be little or no food at all, this means that they will consume relatively few calories. Compare this with the modern dog that is usually given a set amount of food every day and may appear to be always able to eat a bit more. The owner thinks that the dog's appetite should be satiated at every sitting otherwise they are being unkind. But the dog sees it differently – he is only doing what comes naturally and that is to fill his belly whenever he gets opportunity. This of course is the slippery road to a fat, listless, unfit, unhappy dog.

FOOD

The type of food given can also have an effect on the amount the dog is willing to eat at one sitting. Many modern foods are made with by-products and other un-wholesome ingredients. If the food contains artificial appetisers or sugars, as many do, it will obviously be more attractive and he is likely to eat more. Also, food which is manufactured using these ingredients will not be as satisfying as food made to Natural Feeding principles, that is, containing a range of whole unadulterated nutrients based on what the dog would eat in wild.

Many companies produce special diets for dogs on weight loss programme but many of these mainly simply reduce the energy level by increasing the fibre content, which is usually a by-product. This approach to weight loss produces voluminous stools and the dog does not want to eat it unless it is generously laced with chemical appetisers. Such products are of course cheaper to produce and are sold at vastly inflated prices. These diets are unnecessary if nutrition is provided using products formulated to Natural Feeding principles. There are several commercial companies producing BAHNM certified Holistic Products which may be used to maintain an appropriate weight in dogs.

For free technical information on integrated medicine and advice in specific circumstances contact: tech.help@bahnm.org.uk

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