

Cat and Dog Obesity Rates Rise

Half of U.S. pets now are overweight or obese, new data suggests.

By Soraya Gutierrez

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A study suggests that as many as 46 million cats are overweight and 17 million are obese. Armed with measuring tape and scales, veterinary professionals representing 29 states examined the waistlines of their regular patients as part of a study on pet obesity conducted by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention. The findings indicate that nearly half of the nation's cats and dogs are now overweight or obese.

"This is a serious problem," said the study's lead investigator, Dr. Ernie Ward. "What troubles me is the greater risk for high blood pressure and diabetes."

The number of obese cats was startling, Ward said. According to the study, 53 percent of cats and 43 percent of dogs were classified as overweight or obese by a veterinary healthcare provider; 19 percent of cats and 10 percent of dogs were found to be obese.

"The pet data is closely paralleling that of humans," Ward said. "We are becoming a nation of couch potatoes and lap potatoes."

The study included 282 cats ages 1 to 21 years and 704 dogs ages 1 to 17 years. Veterinarians from 98 small animal clinics collected the data on National Pet Obesity Awareness Day, Oct. 17, 2007.

A 1 to 5 Body Condition Scale was used to track whether an animal was: very thin, BCS 1; underweight, BCS 2; ideal, BCS 3; overweight, BCS 4; or obese, BCS 5.

According to the association's estimates, the study suggests that as many as 46 million cats and 32 million dogs in the United States are overweight or obese. Almost 17 million cats and 8 million dogs are thought to be obese.

"Fat is biologically active tissue, and an excess amount negatively impacts almost every body system," Ward said. "We're in real danger of raising an entire generation of pets that will live a shorter life expectancy than the dogs and cats we enjoyed as children."

The study also looked into pet owners' assessment of their cat's or dog's weight. The majority of pet owners understand that their pet is too heavy, with 73 percent of cat owners with overweight felines stating their cat was overweight and 63 percent of dog owners who have overweight canines classifying their pet correctly.

Combating obesity, Ward said, must begin with bilateral communication: pet owners must ask if their furry friends are too heavy, and veterinarians need to tell owners when a pet is overweight. Once that awareness is established, lifestyle changes come into play.

For example, avoid overfeeding. Treats, Ward said, are a "silent saboteur" and easily can be replaced with healthier alternatives. For cats, he recommends a pinch of salmon. For dogs, baby carrots.

Better yet, Ward said, keep pets active by engaging them in play. Chances are that it's attention that pets seek, he said, not a high-calorie treat.