

Pet Obesity on the Rise, Study Finds

More than half of cats are estimated to be overweight or obese, an increase from 2007.

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Overweight and obese cats are in danger of developing conditions such as diabetes and arthritis, experts say. A new study by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention reveals that more than 57 percent of cats and 44 percent of dogs are estimated to be overweight or obese.

The National Pet Obesity Awareness Day Study was conducted in October by 95 U.S. veterinary clinics, which evaluated 669 dogs, ages 1-16, and 202 cats, ages 1-19.

From 2007 to 2008, the number of overweight cats and dogs increased by 1 percent and 4 percent, respectively, according to the study.

"Pet obesity continues to emerge as a leading cause of preventable disease and death in dogs and cats," said Ernie Ward, DVM, lead researcher and founder of the association. "Our pets are in real danger of not living as long as previous generations and developing serious and costly diseases such as diabetes, arthritis and other largely avoidable conditions."

Obesity rates in cats were highest at 17.8 percent while obesity rates in dogs were 9.6 percent. About 39.6 percent of all cats and 34.7 percent of dogs were classified as overweight.

Overall, the study estimates that there are 7.2 million obese and 26 million overweight dogs. The number in cats is higher, with 15.7 million estimated to be obese and 35 million overweight. (Veterinarians use body condition score (BCS) systems to help determine a pet's ideal weight.)

The study also found that older animals had a higher incidence of being overweight. For example, the study revealed that 52.1 percent of dogs and 55 percent of cats over age 7 were found to be overweight or obese.

"We're seeing more and more diabetes, respiratory and arthritic conditions in older pets as a direct result of obesity. These are often chronic, incurable and generally preventable diseases. Pet owners need to understand that a few extra pounds on a dog or cat is similar to a person being 30 to 50 pounds overweight," Ward said.

Interestingly, most pet owners with heavy pets accurately reported their pet's weight status when asked by veterinary health care provider. For instance, 71.5 percent of owners with overweight or obese cats identified their cats as overweight or obese, and 60 percent of dog owners agreed with their veterinarian's assessment of their dog's weight.

"This tells me pet owners know their pet is too heavy," Ward said. "It's up to veterinarians to help pet lovers get their pet back to a healthy weight."