

5 Must Ask Questions about Pet Obesity

Dr. Ernie Ward, DVM

Ernie has more than 20 years of experience in the veterinary industry and is a well-known veterinarian, media personality and author. He is also a founding member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team.

I hate to tell you this, but for the past 23 years I've been looking at a lot of fat pets. Part of the reason is that I'm a veterinarian whose area of interest is [obesity](#); the other part is that dogs and cats are just generally getting fatter. My organization, [The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention](#), found that in 2013 about 53% of dogs and 58% of cats were overweight in our seventh annual veterinary [survey](#). That equals almost 90 million pets at risk for developing serious weight related disorders such as [diabetes](#), [arthritis](#), high blood pressure, and [cancer](#). That's 90 million too many. We must do better.

1. Is my pet at risk for a medical problem due to weight?

This is a very serious question that will help you understand and plan for your pet's future. Dogs and cats carrying extra fat are at a greater risk of developing debilitating [diabetes](#), crippling [arthritis](#), deadly high blood pressure and many forms of catastrophic [cancer](#). You need to have a frank conversation with your [veterinarian](#) to find out if your pet is potentially facing one of these [conditions](#).

Preventing disease is my focus and one of the reasons I'm so passionate about the importance of maintaining a healthy weight and proper [nutrition](#). The most important decision you make each day about your pet's health is what you choose to feed him. Choose wisely; your pet's life depends on it. [Click here to learn more about nutrition and obesity in pets.](#)

2. Is my pet overweight?

This is the most important question to ask your [veterinarian](#); unfortunately it's a question that your veterinarian may not be eager to answer. Believe

it or not, many veterinarians are simply afraid to tell you that your pet is [too heavy](#). This is primarily due to the fact that your veterinarian doesn't want to inadvertently offend you. Weight issues are tricky and loaded with perceived judgment, strong emotions, and social stigmas. All of this leads many veterinarians to remark, "Maybe Scooter could drop a few pounds, but who shouldn't?" As a concerned pet guardian, you need to understand your pet's weight is one of the most influential factors of longevity, quality of life, and [disease](#) prevention.

To answer this question candidly, your veterinarian will likely conduct a couple of measurements, determine a body condition score (BCS), and declare your pet fit or flab.

Ask the question. [Demand a thorough assessment](#). Don't be offended if the answer isn't what you expected. This isn't personal; it's your pet's future.

3. How many calories should I feed my pet each day?

We've got to be specific when it comes to feeding our pets. Don't fall into the trap of inquiring, "How much should I feed?" You'll probably get a generic, inaccurate response. You need precise numbers of calories. That way, regardless of the type, brand, or formulation of [food](#) you feed, you can determine how much to feed. This is a subtle, but incredibly significant difference.

Once your [veterinarian](#) does give you a number, memorize it. Find out how many cups or cans of your pet's food it equals. Feed that amount. Don't forget to include any treats in your daily caloric counts. Those tiny "calorie grenades" can swiftly sabotage the best dietary plans. [Click here to learn more about nutrition in growing dogs.](#)

4. How much weight should my pet lose in a month?

If your pet is like the majority of US dogs and cats, he'll

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need to drop a few pounds. You need to ask how much weight your pet must shed and how long it will take to reach a healthy weight. I prefer to think in terms of pounds per month due to practicality and performance. Monthly weight checks are practical and reasonable for even the busiest pet parents. A weight loss plan's performance is critical to track and monitor monthly trends and is an accurate indicator of success or stagnation.

In general terms, a dog can safely lose 1-3% of body weight and cats 0.5-2%. Many dogs can lose 3-5% and most cats should aim for about a half-pound per month.

Losing weight isn't easy or fast for pets, especially cats. If you put your cat on a crash [diet](#), he can develop serious medical [conditions](#), including a life-threatening form of [liver](#) failure that can occur in less than 72 hours. Patience is essential with pet weight loss. Most of my canine patients will have a 3-6 month weight loss plan and cats, 9-12 months. Your veterinarian will probably formulate a step-weight-loss plan that will gradually decrease the amount you're feeding over a 1-3 month period. This will help curtail cravings, begging and late-night pestering. Note I said "help," not "eradicate." There will be some unhappy pooches and purr babies when you institute a diet. Your veterinarian should provide you with tips on preventing these [behaviors](#) and transitioning to a new weight-loss diet.

5. What kinds of exercises are good for my pet?

Most veterinarians and pet parents focus on how long a pet should [exercise](#) each day. Instead, ask your veterinarian what types of activities are best based on your pet's species, [breed](#), [age](#), gender, and current physical abilities. Walking, swimming, agility, chase, ball retrieving and remote controlled toys-the opportunities are limitless. The general recommendation is that dogs need at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day and cats should strive for three 5 minute intense play periods. Make your outings enjoyable, entertaining and interactive.

Don't forget that cats can exercise too. Whether you play with a feather duster, move the [food](#) bowl or use a hip high tech toy, engage your cat's inner predator and encourage him to pounce, leap, and prowls everyday.

I'm a fan of the new generation of pet activity monitors. They're a great tool to document how much your pet is walking or playing each day. Better yet, you can share these reports with your veterinarian to spot any deficiencies or ways to maximize training.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian -- they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.