

Obesity

Obesity is an extremely important health problem in dogs and cats. Recent estimates suggest up to 35% of dogs and cats are obese.

Why obesity is bad

Many pet owners allow their dog or cat to become obese because they feel a shorter life full of tasty treats and table scraps is better than a long life with “boring” food. While pets do very much enjoy these treats, the idea that their obesity is only a problem at the end of their life is misguided; in fact, obese pets suffer from their weight daily. Below is a list of problems that obese pets face day-to-day, in between those tasty treats:

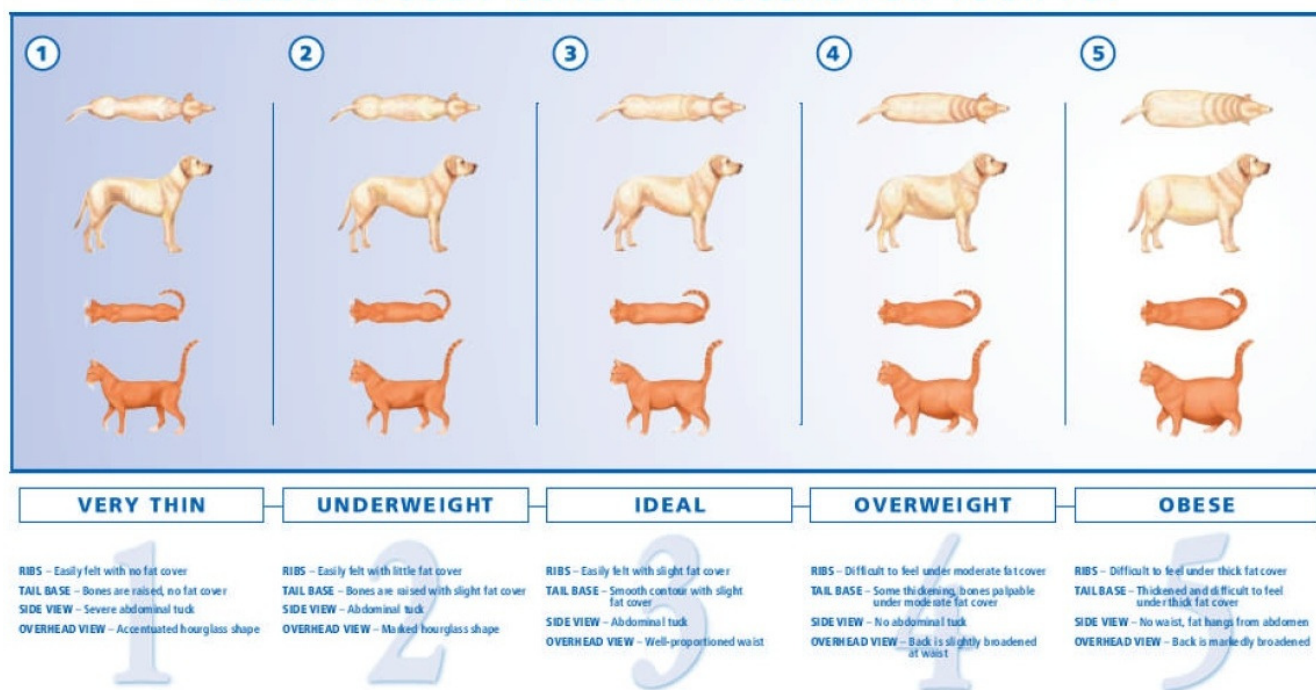
- *Arthritis and mobility issues:* overweight animals place more stress on their joints, which accelerates progression of degenerative joint disease (see our Pet Health Library for more information on this condition: <http://lacostavet.com/pet-health-resources/pet-health-library.html>). This causes pain, which results in decreased mobility, causing further weight gain.
- *Diabetes mellitus:* excess fat causes insulin resistance, which precipitates diabetes mellitus. Pets with diabetes need special (expensive) diets, twice daily insulin shots and frequent (expensive) blood monitoring termed a “blood glucose curve”. If diabetes is poorly regulated, your pet will urinate, drink and beg for food constantly, your cat may develop nerve disease and your dog may develop cataracts and blindness. Furthermore, poorly regulated diabetes can result in a very serious condition called “diabetic ketoacidosis” that requires emergency treatment and up to several days’ hospitalization.
- *Poor grooming/increased soiling:* pets that are obese cannot clean themselves well. This results in fecal and urine soiling at their hind end, and matting in cats.
- *Respiratory compromise:* obese pets have a thick fat layer around their chest, making them less able to take deep breaths and fully inflate their lungs. This results in coughing, overheating and, in some cases, chronic respiratory disease.
- *Increased surgical/anesthetic risk:* because of this respiratory compromise, and because of the difficulty calculating drug dosages for obese pets, anesthesia is riskier for obese pets. Surgery is much harder in obese pets, as the surgeon must work around the pet’s slippery fat.

How can I tell if my pet is obese?

Veterinarians will use a term called “body condition scoring” to estimate if your pet is overweight, underweight or ideal. These are scored out of 5 or out of 9, and 2-3 or 4-5, respectively, are ideal weights.

Below is a body condition scoring chart produced by Hill’s®. As a rule of thumb, your pet should have an easily defined waist when viewed from the side or from above:

SELECT A BODY CONDITION SCORE FOR YOUR PET



How did my pet get so fat when I don't feed him or her very much?

It is important to keep in mind that your pet is much smaller than you are! What seems like a small amount of food to you may indeed be a huge amount of calories for them. Below is a list of common factors involved in pet obesity:

- **Treats:** just like snacking in humans, when considering how much your cat or dog eats it can be easy to forget about treats! For many pet owners, feeding treats is a major part of the human-animal bond. Your pet is probably used to your treat routine, and you do not have to give this up. Instead, consider breaking the treats you feed into quarters (and feeding one quarter instead of a whole treat) so that your pet gets less calories per treat. Also consider giving protein-dense instead of carbohydrate-dense treats (as long as your pet has good kidney and liver function) or substituting dog treats for a piece of a baby carrot.
- **Children:** children may spill snacks, or may deliberately feed pets under the dinner table. Elderly family members may also be more likely to give table scraps.
- **Is a cup really a cup?** Many pet owners pour food into their pet's bowl without measuring how much they are feeding. It is important that you know how much you are feeding your cat or dog- this should be measured in baking cups, not variably-sized drinking cups!
- **Package guidelines are just guidelines:** each pet is an individual; it is important to feed your pet to an ideal body condition score, regardless of what the package guidelines say!
- **Hypothyroidism:** this is an endocrine condition of dogs that causes a slow metabolism and weight gain. If you are really struggling to get your dog to lose weight, consider bloodwork to test your dog for this condition. If he or she has this, it is treated with an easy twice daily tablet long-term.

Getting pets to lose weight

This can be easier said than done!

- *Weigh him or her frequently:* the most important thing is to weigh your dog frequently; depending on how overweight your pet is, this may be once weekly, twice monthly or once monthly. If your pet is small, you can pick your pet up, step on the scale together, weigh yourself and subtract. If your pet is larger and you are a client at La Costa Animal Hospital, please feel free to bring your pet to our clinic during opening hours so that he or she may be weighed and the updated weight entered into the medical chart.
- *Set targets:* your veterinarian can give you an idea of your dog's target weight. He or she should achieve this slowly, at 2% body weight loss per month. If your pet loses weight faster than this, they will also lose lean body mass such as muscle, which will predispose to weight re-gain in the future. Your veterinarian can discuss with you how to modify your feeding routine to achieve these goals.
- *Exercise:* obese pets should not engage in strenuous exercise, especially when it is hot out; slow, steady walks around the neighborhood can facilitate weight loss. Interactive toys can encourage cats to burn more calories.
- *Special diets:* the diet your pet is on may be appropriate for your him or her, they may just need less of it! In some cases, weight loss may be easier if the diet is changed. Cats should be fed diets that have less than 7% of their calories coming from carbohydrates (a list of commercial diets that fit this requirement is available in our Pet Health Library: <http://lacostavet.com/pet-health-resources/pet-health-library.html>).

Pets may do best on a prescription diet made by Hill's® called the Metabolic Advanced Weight Solution. Before starting on this diet, the staff at La Costa Animal Hospital will perform a series of measurements on your pet to determine their target weight and formulate a week-by-week weight loss guide. This guide will also indicate how much of this diet and the accompanying treats your pet should be fed. The staff and veterinarians at La Costa Animal Hospital have seen great success on this diet. If you would like to start your pet on the "metabolic diet", please call La Costa Animal Hospital at 760 944 1266 and set up an appointment! For more information, please visit the Hill's® website: <http://www.hillspet.com/metabolic-pet-food.html>.