

Newsletter of the COMMUNITY PRACTICE SERVICE

Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine
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Fall 2009

The skinny on obese pets

Charlie is a two-year-old cat that wears an apron. The only problem is that the "apron" is a layer of fat under his belly that sways from side to side as he walks.

Weight gain is a common occurrence in pets as they age, especially for dogs. But veterinarians are increasingly seeing young pets carrying more weight than they should. There are many reasons for this, and pets owners can help prevent their pet from becoming overweight or reduce their pets' weight if they are aware of the different ways their actions may play a role.

"Pet obesity is the most common nutritional abnormality in pets," said Dr. Matt Mickas, head of the WSU Community Practice Service. "At least half of pet dogs are overweight and the same is true of cats, if not more. There is a perception that overweight or obese pets are older, sedentary animals. We frequently see it in young animals as well. One big reason is that more animals are spending time indoors, especially cats. Often, their owners do it to keep them safe from wildlife, other pets, and diseases, which are good things and many pets live longer because of it. The problem is that they eat as much as



Charlie

normal, or a recommended amount for a normally active pet, but their daily activity level is decreased. For instance, cats out in the wild or outdoors have a very wide range of territory and do lots of activities, compared to indoor cats, whose territory may be between the couch and the food dish.

"I think another big factor is that many people with their busy lives, work, kids, and other family commitments find it hard to make time to exercise their pets," he said. "It is hard to find time to walk the dog when you can't find any time for yourself. Another factor is that sometimes the bond people create with their pets is with food and treats, kind of like people who like to go out for ice cream together. Many people don't realize how calorie-dense pet treats are. Free-choice feeding can also be a problem for indoor pets."

Common health issues that can arise in overweight or obese pets include diabetes, osteoarthritis and other orthopedic illnesses, difficulty breathing and other respiratory problems, decreased stamina, heat intolerance, a lower quality of life, and potentially a shorter lifespan. There is also a higher risk with anesthesia in obese pets, and a lower immune resistance to infectious diseases.

"Helping a pet lose weight is a difficult challenge, but for those that accomplish it, there is usually a significant change in the animal's attitude and activity level," Dr. Mickas said. "A pet will seem like a 4-year-old again when it had been acting like a 10-year-old. Pets often have more energy and are able to get around better because the extra weight is off their joints. Another benefit is that many pets need less medication, such as anti-inflammatory drugs that were given to help with joint pain or arthritis."

Sometimes it can be hard to tell if a pet weighs more than it should, especially if a pet has thick or shaggy fur. Veterinarians assess a pet's weight with a body condition score, which is a clinical evaluation of an animal's physical characteristics. The scoring includes determining the overall conformation of the animal, the

size and location of major fat deposits on the body, and visible and invisible skeletal structures. Since a number of conditions cause obesity, a veterinarian can examine a pet for any underlying health problems that may need to be treated before a diet or exercise program is initiated.

If a pet is considered overweight, a veterinarian can determine what a pet's ideal weight should be, recommend a timeline for weight loss expectations, a diet plan for how much the pet should be fed and when, and an appropriate exercise routine.

"Often, it takes an overweight pet six months to a year to get to an optimal body weight if their owners follow through with a weight-loss plan," Dr. Mickas said. "If they don't understand the

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To make an appointment call:
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THE SKINNY | *continued from page 1*

time commitment involved, many owners get frustrated when it doesn't happen faster. Pets also have weight loss plateaus just like people do, so owners need to expect that and help their pets work through them."

In addition, veterinarians can help pets that need medication to control pain in order to get their activity level up. Some animal hospitals, such as WSU's Veterinary Teaching Hospital, have physical therapy programs with specialized equipment like underwater treadmills to help pets with physical disabilities. There are also some prescription medications available exclusively for severely overweight dogs that bind fat to help them lose weight.

"We have had several dogs in which these medications were very successful in helping with weight loss," Dr. Mickas said. "We had one pet that was a patient of the orthopedic service that lost 22 pounds in three months. But pets can only receive the medication for 3-6 months, and then their owners need to switch them to a more regular diet and exercise plan.

"There are many diets available for pets that need to lose weight," he said. "The size of the pet doesn't really matter; nutritional demands are based on their level of activity and metabolic rate. There are different diets that are appropriate for different stages of a pet's life, but an older pet diet or a light, reduced-calorie diet may be appropriate for pets that are only a year old. Veterinarians can help determine which diet is best, and may recommend a prescription diet. They can also recommend a maintenance diet after a pet gets to its ideal weight."

In addition to dietary changes, eating habits may also have to be modified. Rather than placing food in a dish for a pet to feed on throughout the day, it is often better to put out a specific amount at breakfast and dinnertime. For cats, it can be helpful to put one portion of a meal in one part of the house and then another in a different part of the house so the cat has to hunt for the food. Placing treats inside a tube like an old paper towel or toilet paper tube with the ends folded over is another good way to make pets work to get the treat out.

"Weight loss requires more owner participation, but the extra time can be very rewarding," Dr. Mickas said. "A 30-minute walk is not only good for a dog, but also for the person walking the dog. Other good ways to get pets moving include swimming, playing fetch, chasing pets around the house, and using activity-related toys and obstacle courses. Try to make the special bond with your pet more with exercise rather than food or treats."

For more information about animal weight-related issues or to make an appointment for your pet, contact WSU's Community Practice Service at 509-335-0711.



The WSU Community Practice Team

The veterinarians of the WSU Community Practice offer a full range of services for small animals without a referral. These services include basic care, vaccinations, dental exams, and geriatric checkups, as well as more advanced diagnostics and care for sick animals.

We work together as a team to provide efficient and comprehensive care for all of our patients. The Community Practice Service operates like a regular veterinary practice, but with the added benefit of access to veterinary specialists in virtually every area of small animal medicine and surgery, as well as the best-equipped veterinary teaching hospital in the Northwest with 24-hour emergency and ICU care. You can be sure that your pet is receiving the best possible care at the WSU Community Practice.



The WSU Community Practice Team,

left to right: veterinary technician Tami Montgomery, Dr. Raelynn Farnsworth, Dr. Matt Mickas, and veterinary technicians Melody Gerber and Teresa Crawford Carson.

Feline asthma

If a cat is seen coughing, a first thought may be that the animal is working up a hair ball. But if the coughing is accompanied with wheezing, heaving, open-mouth breathing, or the cat seems to be struggling for air, it could be suffering an asthma attack.

Asthma rarely occurs in dogs, but it is not uncommon in cats, especially Siamese and Himalayan cat breeds. Asthma causes the bronchi, or small air passages in the lungs, to become inflamed, obstructed with mucous, and spasm or contract. This restricts breathing and makes it hard for a cat to get air into its lungs.

Asthma attacks occur in episodes, usually triggered by allergens or stress. Common allergens include pollen, smoke from cigarettes or other sources, dust, molds, cleaning products, aerosols including deodorizers or perfume, cat litter, and food. Asthma can also be triggered by other innocuous conditions such as heat, cold, dry air, exercise, or stress. The degree that a cat is affected can be mild or severe. Some cats may hardly show signs or may have a mild cough or wheeze. Others suffer severe attacks in which they go into respiratory distress and require emergency care. In this scenario, cats can die without emergency treatment due to respiratory failure.

"When you see a cat open-mouth breathing or heaving, know that something is seriously wrong," said Dr. Matt Mickas, head of the Community Practice Service at WSU's Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

Many cats develop asthma as they reach maturity, usually between two to four years of age. It is a lifelong condition in which a cure is unlikely. Happily, most cats with asthma are very well controlled with relatively inexpensive medication and live normal lives.

To diagnose asthma, a veterinarian will take down a cat's thorough medical history, perform a physical exam to check for an increased expiratory effort and to detect any underlying problems or illnesses that can mimic asthma, and take chest radiographs or x-rays.

"Often, there are specific signs on an x-ray that are indicative of asthma," Dr. Mickas said. "Trapped air in the lungs will make the lungs look hyper-inflated, and there may be a flattening of the diaphragm muscle. But sometimes, making a diagnosis can be difficult because some cats with asthma symptoms don't show any abnormalities on diagnostic tests. If that is the case, we can safely do a bronchial wash to retrieve material from the lungs to look for cells that are indicative of inflammation associated with asthma.



Phil

There are several therapies available to treat cats with asthma. Treatment varies based on the severity of the asthma. Cats that have minimal symptoms can be treated with an antihistamine similar to loratadine (Claritin®) for humans. Bronchodilators, a type of medication that is very common in treating humans with asthma, can also be used in an oral form or aerosol inhaler to help open the bronchial tubes and clear mucus to increase airflow into the lungs. Corticosteroids may also be prescribed to help with inflammation.

If a cat presents to a veterinary hospital with a severe asthma attack, oxygen therapy might be used to help the cat recover.

"Recovery time is usually very rapid with an inhaler or medication," Dr. Mickas said. "More and more frequently, owners are getting inhalers for episodes that their cats have at home. Owners can get pretty astute at recognizing signs that precede an asthma attack, such as episodes of coughing, open-mouth breathing, if the cat is sitting really still, or hides under the bed and won't interact with anyone. Inhalers can help prevent severe bouts of asthma if a cat receives the medication in time."

Beyond medication, it is also helpful to remove as many triggers as possible from a cat's environment to prevent asthma attacks. A veterinarian can help determine what they are.

"This can be difficult, and there can be a lot of factors at play," Dr. Mickas said. "But even if you can't remove a stimulus completely, lowering the amount will help reduce the number of attacks. This is easier if the offending item is a rug deodorizer or cleaner. I had one cat that was affected by household pine cleaners. But it is not so easy if the culprit is cigarette smoke and the owner is a smoker."

Determining what the triggers are can take time and a bit of experimenting. For instance, if cat litter is the suspected culprit, owners can try switching brands or using shredded newspaper or dust-free sand. If cold or hot weather seems to set a cat off, keep it indoors where it will be more comfortable.

It is also important that cats with asthma have regular veterinary checkups and have all their vaccinations up-to-date. Veterinary attention should also be sought for asthmatic cats if they have ongoing respiratory problems that do not resolve with asthma medication. Cats can become infected with several viral or bacterial respiratory diseases that could make their asthma much worse.

For more information, contact the WSU Community Practice Service at WSU's Veterinary Teaching Hospital at 509-335-0711.

Want to know more about the Community Practice and small animal specialty services, or receive our quarterly newsletter online?

Visit the WSU Veterinary College Web site at www.vetmed.wsu.edu/depts-vth/smallAnimalServices.aspx, or subscribe to the online newsletter at www.vetmed.wsu.edu/depts-vth/newsletters.

Also feel free to call 509-335-0711 for **veterinary appointments** or **emergency care**.

What to expect with your aging pet

It is commonly accepted that a year in a dog's life is equivalent to seven human years. While that notion is common, it is not accurate. Longevity is affected by many things, including size, and does not necessarily progress in a linear fashion.

Large breed dogs, for example, age faster than small breeds. In human terms, a seven-year-old large breed dog would be considered 50 to 56 years old, while a small breed dog at seven would be considered 44 to 47 years old, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). At 15 years, a large breed dog would be considered 93 to 115 human years old, and a small breed dog would be considered 76 to 83 years old. Cats age in a similar manner to small breed dogs, and at seven actual years of age would be considered about 45 years old, and at 15 would be about 78 years old. But, at best, these are only rough comparisons.

While it is fun to guess at how old a pet would be in human terms, it is important to know that around age six or seven in actual years, both dogs and cats may begin to develop age-related problems and need increased veterinary care as they get older. They may also require a change in diet, or some alterations to the home to help those with stiffness or arthritic pain.

"I would consider cats and small dogs geriatric starting around seven to nine years of age," said Dr. Raelynn Farnsworth, a WSU Community Practice veterinarian. "At this point, owners should consider bringing their pet in for semi-annual checkups. Ideally, they should have an annual blood work panel done, a thyroid test if it is a cat, and perhaps chest radiographs if there are symptoms. It is usually better for the animal and most cost-effective for the owner to find a problem early so that it can be treated or slowed in its progress. Combined, this can lead to a longer life for the pet, and a better quality of life. Because large breed dogs age faster than smaller breeds, owners may want to consider having annual blood work done when they turn five or six years old.

"As cats age, serious problems that frequently develop include kidney disease, hyperthyroidism, and various forms of cancer," she said. "For older dogs, cancer, kidney, and liver disease are common causes of death."

Other typical problems that can decrease a pet's quality of life include weight gain, arthritis, dementia, and sight and hearing loss.

"Senility is not uncommon in older pets," Dr. Farnsworth said. "Pets with dementia may get lost in the house, sleep more, cry or

whine more, not seem to know what is going on, or don't respond normally as in the past. They may be restless or have trouble sleeping at night or have potty accidents because they can't remember how to get out of the house. Veterinarians can prescribe medication that can help with this. Sometimes, it

helps them when other problems like pain are treated too. An accurate diagnosis may discover other problems occurring simultaneously, and treating some of those may increase the animal's overall quality of life despite knowing it is not their primary complaint."

Even for perfectly healthy pets, normal aging results in some level of arthritis, which can cause them to slow down or become stiff.

"Even if they are healthy, owners should assume their pet has some arthritis and watch them for weight gain," Dr. Farnsworth said. "There are geriatric pet foods available that are mostly low in calories to help prevent weight gain.

"Like many things though, there are exceptions. Some pets lose weight as they age, so these pets should not be fed a low calorie diet. Veterinarians can recommend appropriate diets and discuss over-the-counter supplements like glucosamine and chondroitin to help pets with arthritis."

Exercise is also important for older pets, but a rule of thumb is that short, consistent periods of exercise are much better than longer, infrequent bursts.

"Taking an older dog for a walk once a day for 20 minutes around the block is much better than letting the dog loose in a field for an hour once a week," Dr. Farnsworth said.

For more information about geriatric pet care or to make an appointment with the Community Practice Service for your pet, contact WSU's Veterinary Teaching Hospital at 509-335-0711. More information can also be found online at the American Veterinary Medical Association's Web site at www.avma.org/animal_health/care_older_pet_faq.asp.



Jill, a 14-year-old West Highland white terrier.

Grieving? You don't have to be alone

Have you lost a beloved animal companion? Perhaps you know someone who has. The WSU College of Veterinary Medicine has a Pet Loss Hotline for those who would like to reach out for a caring listener. In addition, WSU's Pet Memorial Program offers families a wonderful way to memorialize and celebrate the life of their pet while supporting the education of future veterinary care providers.

To contact the Pet Loss Hotline, call 509-335-5704 or e-mail plhl@vetmed.wsu.edu.

For more information about the WSU Pet Memorial Program or to make a donation, contact Tim Osborn at 509-335-9516 or tosborn@vetmed.wsu.edu. Information can also be found online at www.vetmed.wsu.edu/depts-prd/memorial.aspx.

Seeking care for your pet at WSU's Veterinary Teaching Hospital

Every day, veterinarians at Washington State University's College of Veterinary Medicine provide state-of-the-art medical care for animals and crucial information for owners and referring veterinarians. From dogs, cats, and horses to parakeets, cattle, alpacas, llamas, and iguanas, animals from all walks of life are treated in our world-class clinical teaching facilities.

WSU's Veterinary Teaching Hospital (VTH) operates 24 hours a day, with regular business hours from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. It is a full service hospital serving the Pacific Northwest and western Canada. The teaching hospital is also part of the Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences, one of three academic departments in the College of Veterinary Medicine. The hospital offers services to both large and small animals, as well as some nearby livestock units.

The VTH is a state-assisted \$38 million facility that opened in September 1996. Each year, about 15,000 animals are treated here. The nearly three-acre building encompasses the hospital, clinical laboratory, and epidemiological surveillance service, all under one roof. The central core provides space for surgery suites for small and large animals, clinical pathology, seminar rooms, administrative areas, reception, special medicine and diagnostic areas, and the state's only pharmacy dedicated exclusively to animals.

The VTH enjoys the finest medical imaging capabilities available to veterinary medicine. WSU is one of the most advanced veterinary hospitals in the world with such sophisticated systems as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), computerized tomography (CT scan), and nuclear scintigraphy (bone scanning). Digital radiography and computer aided radiography are also available. In addition to these services, ultrasound, endoscopy, arthroscopy, laser surgery, and therapeutic technologies including surgery, medical management, and radiation therapy are available.

Specialized medical treatments in certain areas are also available at the VTH. These include cancer treatments that involve advanced surgical techniques, radiation therapy provided by the college's \$2 million linear accelerator, chemotherapy, and palliative care.

Client animals are treated by renowned specialists who are also in the process of training compassionate and capable future veterinarians. Faculty in the Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences conduct research to enhance current knowledge of diseases, diagnostics, and treatment. WSU veterinarians have made recent advancements in the diagnosis and treatment of brain tumors, neurological problems, and canine osteoarthritis. They've conducted field disease investigations affecting herds and flocks, and expanded our knowledge of exercise and cardiac physiology and the passive transfer of immunity.

The Community Practice at WSU offers primary veterinary care to animals owned by the public. It operates much like a private veterinary hospital. Examinations and treatments proceed more slowly than in private practices, however, because of the increased attention given to patients associated with training third- and fourth- year professional students and postgradu-

ate students. A team approach is used to evaluate patients that include faculty, residents, interns, students, and staff.

The Community Practice has in-house consultation services available for specialized diagnostic tests and treatments, including radiographic imaging, such as CT scans or MR imaging, and cancer treatment.

Hours of Operation

The Veterinary Teaching Hospital is open for large and small animal appointments from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Emergency care service is also available for large and small animals on a 24-hour basis. Clients with animals in need of emergency care should call the hospital at 509-335-0711 before arrival.

Fees

Fees comparable with private practices are charged for all services provided by the VTH, with payment due in full at the time of service. Clients with animals treated as outpatients will be given an estimate of the cost before the service is provided, with payment due upon completion of the visit. Clients with hospitalized animals will also be given an estimate, with prepayment of half the estimate due upon admission. The other half is due when the animal is discharged.



Directions

The WSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital is located on the Washington State University campus in Pullman off Grimes Way on Ott Way, south of the Lighty Student Services Building. To get to the hospital, turn off Stadium Way heading east onto Grimes Way. Then take the second right turn heading south on Ott Way where a brown sign on the corner says "Veterinary Hospital."

Fall weather pet tips

Back-to-school routines—Transitioning from summer vacation back to school can be hard not only on people, but also for dogs and cats that see their constant summer companions leave for most of the day. A change in an adult's work schedule may also throw some pets off behaviorally. If a pet seems particularly anxious about a schedule change, try to keep other routines, such as feeding times and play time, the same. Exercise also helps. Dogs can be walked more often and cats can benefit from a nightly game of "catch the mouse." It may also help comfort a pet to leave a worn piece of clothing with an owner's scent on it where a dog or cat rests during the day. If a pet seems to have a particularly hard time with separation anxiety, call us for an appointment.

Keep up with tick medication—Tick prevention should continue to be applied until October or November when freezing conditions occur. A number of preventative treatments are available. Contact us with any questions about which treatments or treatment schedules are most suitable for your pet.

Bee stings and allergic reactions—Like humans, animals can suffer allergic reactions to a variety of things including insect bites and stings. If your pet is bitten or stung, carefully remove the stinger and watch the area for an allergic reaction. If a reaction occurs, or if there have been several wasp or bees stings, bring your animal in for veterinary attention. To help prevent bee or wasp stings, inspect your home and yard to eliminate bee hives or wasp nests.

Clinical signs of seasonal or chronic allergies in pets include chewing, licking, head shaking, and scratching. Allergies may also cause inflamed, itchy skin that can lead to infections or a skin condition called atopic dermatitis. Pets may also cough, sneeze, or wheeze and have excess discharge that develops in the nose and eyes. If your pet is experiencing these signs, call us for an appointment.

Common allergens that affect dogs and cats in the fall include molds from dying leaves and decaying plants and ragweed pollen which can be especially heavy from the end of August through October. A veterinarian can prescribe medicine to help with allergic reactions when they occur. To help reduce allergic reactions, pet owners can bath and brush a dog or cat down that has been outdoors once they come inside.

Hiking—Hiking is a great activity, but be sure to plan for yourself and your pet. Must have items include a first aid kit that includes sterile bandages, gauze, disinfectant, and surgical tape. Also bring insect repellent for fleas and ticks, and enough water for both you and your dog, as streams and standing water may contain bacteria that can sicken a dog. You may also want to carry pet snacks, as well as an extra leash and collar. Dogs can get lost in unfamiliar surroundings, so make sure your pet has adequate identification, such as an ID tag on the collar or an identification microchip, or ideally, both.

If a pet gets hurt on the trail and is bleeding, place a clean cloth over the wound and apply pressure for several minutes. Try to

elevate the wound, and add more cloth if the first one soaks through, but do not remove what was already applied. Then do your best to get your pet to a veterinarian as quickly as possible. If no accidents occur, check paws and ears for thorns and other material that it may have picked up after the hike. Lastly, dogs need conditioning like people, so if your pet is mostly sedentary, limit the hike to a few miles.

Hunting Season—With the arrival of hunting season, make sure pets are in safe areas and cannot be mistaken for game. If your dog hunts, make sure to apply tick control and that it is vaccinated for leptospirosis, a serious bacterial disease in dogs that can potentially spread to people. Sources of infection include pond water or puddles contaminated with bacteria from wildlife urine, so hunting dogs are in greater need of vaccination. In scummy ponds, there

can be blue-green algae toxins present, so again, carrying water is the safest. Owners should also check their dogs over at least daily and ideally during each break. Look for sporting injuries and foreign objects such as grass awns that may become lodged in the feet, ears, eyes, and nose. Also, early season hunts can provide a lot of heat stress to an unconditioned animal. Consider some pre-season walks to get both you and your dog off on the right foot.

If overheating occurs, cool your pet first and then seek veterinary attention soon. Signs of overheating include heavy, rapid panting, a body temperature of 104 degrees F. or more, weakness, diarrhea or vomiting, seizures, and potentially coma or death. To get an overheated dog's body

temperature down, soak the animal in cool water or use wet towels to wet the skin, place the pet in front of a fan if possible, and call a veterinarian. If out on the hunt, use the car air conditioner to help cool the dog. But also remember that pets, like children, should never be left unattended in a car during warm weather.

Storing pet food—Pet food, like our food, loses much of its nutritional value over time. Pet food can also spoil and cause illness if fed. Store unused portions of dry pet food in a cool, dry location, and use all the food within six months of purchase. Lengthy storage decreases the activity and potency of many vitamins. Storing dry food in an airtight container will prevent further nutrient deterioration and help maintain its flavor, too.

Holiday foods—Halloween is a time when costumed strangers ring doorbells, and bowls are filled with tempting candy. Keep your pet in a safe place during this time. For anxious pets, make a quiet room available where pets will not get scared or run off. Remember that chocolate is somewhat toxic to pets and ingestion of candy can result in an upset stomach and diarrhea. Traditional Thanksgiving dinner foods can also lead to gastrointestinal illness in our furry friends. It is best to keep your pet's normal diet the mainstay during the holidays.



Bosco