

TIPS FOR WEIGHT LOSS IN DOGS AND CATS - PART 1 – EXERCISE – *Lisa S. Couper, DVM*

Just like with us, weight loss in dogs and cats = calories eaten – calories burned.

The calories burned part of the equation is quite simple and safe for both dogs and cats. So let us address this first. If we don't change a thing with their diet and increase their exercise it is a very good start.

Increasing calories burned, better known as exercise, is safe for both dogs and cats. And even a small increase in activity level each day can have tremendous benefits. Go slow at first, especially if your dog or cat is a big time couch potato. Take care with any type of high impact play (Frisbee or cat toy chasing) if your pet is significantly overweight. This can easily lead to injury, such as a ruptured ACL and further decrease their activity.



For dogs take them on a daily walk. Spend time playing ball or games with them on a daily basis – make it a habit for both of you. Make them work to get a treat with a kong or similar toy. Don't just dump all of the dry kibble in a dish but use some of this food as a reward for doing a trick or activity.

For cats that like to play start with 5 minutes twice a day at a minimum 5 days a week. Increase to 10 minutes twice a day after 2 weeks. Also encourage play with treat balls that require effort to get the food treat. And instead of free feeding feed 3-4 small meals a day, have the cat traverse the premises to get to the food. If there is an upstairs it may be worth having the cat climb the stairs to get to the meal.

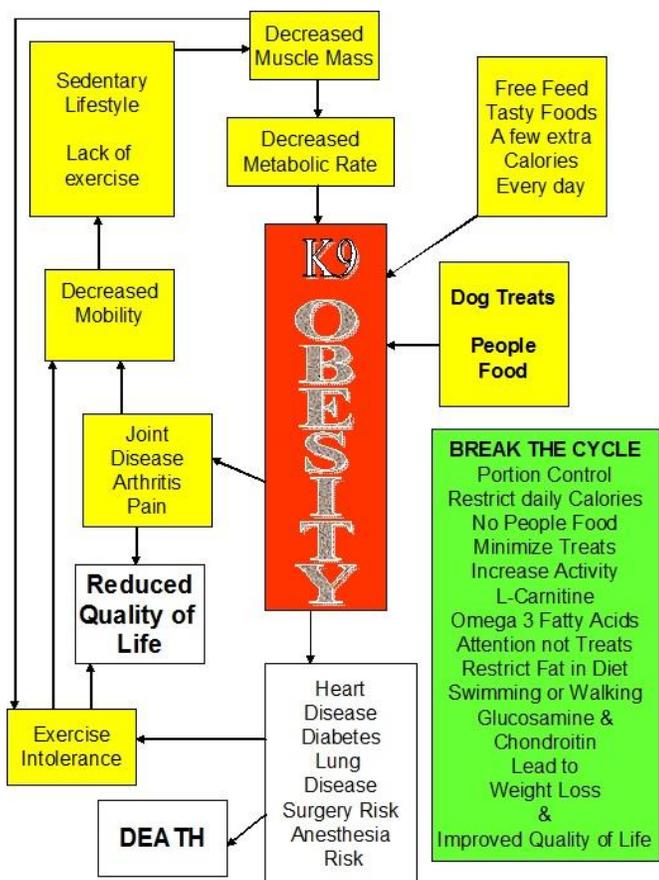
WEIGHT LOSS TIPS - PART II - DIET

So now let's address the diet. Portion control is very important in both the dog and cat. Instead of free feeding feed 3-4 small meals a day and cut out the treats. You can do this safely in both species. Remember calories consumed means kibble, added goodies, canned food, treats, what they sneak from the trash – everything. And while crash dieting (30% calorie restriction) can be a workable strategy for dogs (Aside from them destroying your house looking for food or destroying you with that pitiful “you don't really love me” stare.) it is a **potentially lethal** one for cats. So we will address them first.

If your cat is in need of a diet to lose weight – Please Please – work with your veterinarian to carefully monitor weight loss. It is critical that it be gradual and that the cat continues to eat. Weekly weigh-ins are a critical part of the plan. While waiting for the appointment you can utilize the techniques in Part I to increase your cat's activity, which is an important part of the weight loss equation. Just don't increase their food ration or you will be defeating yourself.



What you need to understand that cats that undergo dramatic and sudden weight loss can develop hepatic lipidosis. Hepatic lipidosis is a serious condition. And because cats can be such finicky eaters, a change to a new diet food or other new food can trigger hepatic lipidosis if the cat does not like that particular cat food. You may think everything is great and you will get the dramatic weight loss you want - but they will keep on losing because they are not eating anything. At this point they typically will not eat anything including their old food or tasty treats. This is a very difficult often unsuccessful condition to treat involving a month or more of hospitalization and surgical placement of a feeding tube. Force feeding without the placement of a feeding tube almost never works.



Please do not make sudden changes in your cat's diet. If you do change, make sure they are eating it. Make sure the food has at least 30% of its calories from high quality protein, a fat content of around 9.5% and the carbohydrate portion based on barley, corn or sorghum. And while a high fiber diet may be effective for a dog, in the cat it has not proven to be a good strategy for weight loss. In fact it can lead to dry stools and constipation.

Since dogs are not prone to hepatic lipidosis crash dieting is an option. The key is **breaking the cycle** shown in this diagram. For long term calorie restriction a specifically formulated canine diet food will ensure that your dog receives all of minimum daily requirements of vitamins and minerals. If you just cut the amount of the existing dog food it is possible to cause deficiencies as the daily allowance is based on feeding a certain amount of the food relative to the dog's body weight. That said short term severe calorie restriction can be a great tool in the dog. Just doing something like replacing 25-30% of the volume of dog food with canned green beans can be effective. Another trick is to eliminate high calorie treats. Instead set aside a certain portion of the dogs regular dry dog food ration to use for this purpose.

Body Scoring is a useful tool for determining how overweight your dog or cat is. I have provided links to these charts below.

Canine Body Score Chart http://www.purinaveterinarydiets.com/resources/Files/dog_chart.pdf

Feline Body Score Chart http://www.purinaveterinarydiets.com/resources/files/cat_chart.pdf

Overweight cat image Yukari/Flickr.com