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Is my dog overweight?

If it appears that your dog needs to shed a few pounds, don't despair. The good news is that most pets can be healthy without having to lose a lot of weight. It can be done and even better, it can be done simply. There can be, however, some obstacles in the way. The food source, the calorie content, the body type, family cooperation and disease states can promote weight gain and obstruct well intended weight loss.

How you determine the right weight for your pet is not a straightforward answer. Dogs are so wonderfully diverse! Think about the sizes (chihuahua vs great dane) and the breed types (greyhound vs. mastiff). This makes it difficult for your vet to give a straight answer about a weight number. The general rule of thumb is to see a waist when looking at your dog's body from above. Another simple quantitative test is to gently pinch the skin near the belly or neck to roughly measure the fat layer thickness. It should only feel like a couple of sheets of paper thick, not a book. I recommend a fantastic site from The World Small Animal Veterinary Association which is available for both owners and veterinarians. They have a nutrition toolkit developed by veterinarians who have specialized in nutrition, <https://www.wsava.org/nutrition-toolkit>. Here you will find multiple resources to help you objectively evaluate foods, body scores, calorie charts and trusted internet sites. It is definitely worth your time to explore these links as well as what the entire website has to offer.

Please don't be afraid to talk with your veterinarian about weight concerns. The simple truth is your dog will live longer if it is lean. In some cases, by up to 2 more years. We want them, and you, to be happy for longer together. From a doctor's standpoint, keeping in shape is beneficial to multiple organ functions; the musculoskeletal, the respiratory, the liver, the endocrine and circulatory system all benefit. There are also specific disease states we can screen for that can cause weight gain such hypothyroidism or hyperadrenocortism. Untreated orthopedic diseases will prevent normal exercise and therefore slow metabolisms and heart and respiratory illnesses will reduce the stamina needed for exercise. Your dog's veterinarians are here to help and we want to.

After determining there are no underlying disease factors, the first step to your pet's weight loss is to be aware of the food itself. Fun fact: there is no correlation between 1 cup of food and calories. Even flavors of the same brand will have different calorie ratios. There are brands of food that have 240 calories/cup and others that may be 520 calories/cup. It gives you the illusion that you are feeding a "small" amount but the calories are not small. Another source of confusion is the suggested feeding guidelines on the bag. They are general and do not take into account metabolism differences, chronic disease states or the amount and type of daily treats.

I firmly believe that all dogs need treats because all dogs deserve treats! The problem is that commercial treats are high in calories and fats. Sometimes ridiculously high! In most of the food calculations I make, I find the owners are making good dog food choices, and it's the treats that are the problems. If your pet is overweight, my best recommendation is to drop the commercial treats and give whole food treats instead. This includes broccoli, apple pieces, oyster crackers, carrots and frozen beans; low calorie, low fat treats that provide scent and crunch that dogs like. If you just can't give up the commercial treat then save them for an extra special day, do not use

them as an everyday supplement. Another thing to consider is that your dog may not be begging for food. Sometimes they just want positive interaction. When you think they are asking you for a treat, try instead playing with them, massaging them or teaching them a new trick instead.

The second component to your pet's weight loss is to increase the exercise which also depends on the current health status of your pet. Before starting, make sure to consult your veterinarian to make sure no health issues are present. If they are otherwise healthy with no underlying problems, increasing exercise should hopefully be easy. Simply go 10 minutes further on the walk or add in an additional daily walk. Make a 1-3x weekly addition of walking uphill or walking in dirt or sand. Always monitor your pet's response to the exercise and adjust. Do not overdo it and make small increases each week rather than one big increase. If you're feeling the burn, so are they! You can tell if they have overdone it if they become lame towards the end and need more than a few moments to recover or if your dog is sleeping the rest of the evening. If there is significant lameness, breathing problem or collapse occur, have them seen by a veterinarian right away.

Weight loss is complex but the approach to it can be simple. Just like with us, pet weight maintenance and loss are all about calories and exercise. The simplest approach is to skim off 10% of the TOTAL amount of food (kibble and treats). This is an easy number to follow as it does not feel like you are starving your pet. It's just like dropping the extra donut or bagel you take to work in the morning. This is an area that the ENTIRE family needs to be committed. Encourage everyone to be more selective about the food and treats given and opt for veggies and lean meats. Monitor the weight every 1-2 weeks. If they plateau and need to lose a bit more, consider if they need another 10% decrease. Also, regularly increase weekly exercise and watch them for signs of problems. You and your pet can do this without having to make a major lifestyle change. And remember, your pet will live longer with improved quality of life with even small weight changes.