

Canine Obesity: An Emerging Veterinary and Welfare Challenge

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Abstract

Canine obesity is one of the most common and largely preventable nutritional disorders, yet it is often overlooked or underestimated by pet owners. Excess body weight can contribute to metabolic dysfunction, diabetes, joint disease, cardiovascular and respiratory problems, certain cancers and reduced life expectancy. This article highlights the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity in dogs and the significant gap between owners' perception and their dogs' actual body condition. It discusses the use of the nine-point body condition score for assessing healthy weight and presents practical strategies for safe weight management, including accurate food measurement, controlled treats, appropriate weight-loss diets, gradual exercise and regular monitoring. Consistent feeding practices among family members and veterinary guidance are also emphasized. Maintaining a healthy body condition can improve mobility, reduce disease risk and support longer, healthier lives in dogs.

Keywords: Canine obesity; Overweight dogs; Body condition score; Weight management; Pet nutrition; Obesity prevention; Veterinary care; Dog health; Exercise; Responsible pet ownership

Introduction

A round, cheerful dog may look healthy and happy, but extra weight quietly shortens lives and causes disease. Obesity is now one of the most common nutritional disorders seen by veterinarians, and it is largely preventable. The challenge is that love often shows up as food: a biscuit at the door, scraps from the table, a larger scoop at dinner. This article explains how widespread the problem is, why owners often miss it, and what really works.

A Growing Problem

Figures from the United States show how quickly the problem has grown. Market research reports that the share of overweight or

obese dogs rose from 43% in 2007 to 59% in 2022 [1]. A study of about 4.9 million dogs and 1.3 million cats seen at primary practices across the USA found that overweight and obese conditions are common throughout adult life and peak in mature animals, and that weight problems in puppies often persist into adulthood [2]. Smaller studies elsewhere show similar numbers: in one region of Spain, 40.9% of dogs examined were obese, and the same proportion had high blood pressure [3].

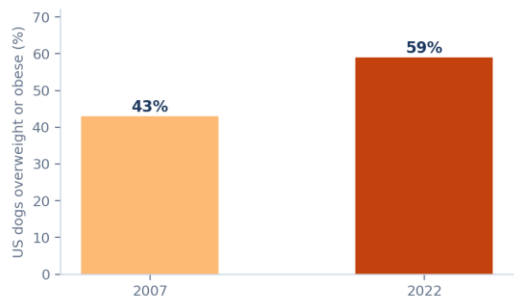


Figure 1. Proportion of US dogs classed as overweight or obese, 2007 and 2022 [1]

The Perception Gap

One of the biggest barriers is that many owners cannot see the problem. The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention found that 59% of dogs were overweight or obese, yet only 17% of dog owners said their dog was overweight, and 84% rated their dog’s body condition as healthy [4]. Pet obesity, in the words of the association’s founder, is too often seen as a problem for other people’s pets [4].

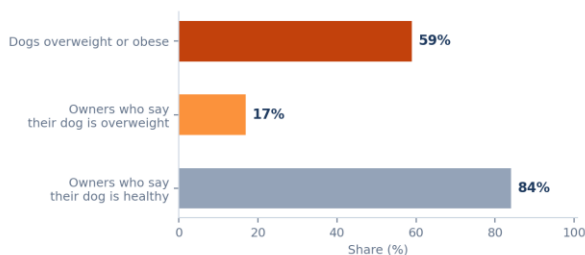


Figure 2. Perception gap: what is true versus what owners believe about their dogs [4]

Why It Matters

Excess fat is not inert. It behaves like an active organ that releases inflammatory chemicals and disturbs hormones. Obesity raises the risk of diabetes, joint disease, heart and breathing problems, some cancers and a shorter life expectancy [1]. In the Spanish study, obese dogs also showed raised blood fats and blood sugar, signs of obesity-related metabolic dysfunction [3]. Weight also worsens arthritis, making exercise painful and creating a vicious circle.

Check Your Dog’s Body Condition

The scale and the mirror can both mislead. Veterinarians use a nine-point body condition score. A dog at an ideal score of 4 or 5 has ribs that can be felt easily under a thin layer of fat, a visible waist when seen from above, and a tucked abdomen when seen from the side. Scores of 6 and 7 are overweight, and 8 and 9 are obese. Ask your vet to show you how to score your dog at home.



Figure 3. The nine-point body condition score used by veterinarians

What Works for Weight Loss

Step	Why it helps
Measure the food	Scoops and cups vary widely. Use kitchen scales for accurate portions.
Count treats	Treats should be a small share of daily calories. Use pieces of the regular diet or low-calorie options.
Use a weight-loss diet	Therapeutic diets provide fewer calories while keeping protein, vitamins and minerals complete.
Exercise gradually	Walking and play burn calories and protect joints. Increase slowly.
Weigh regularly	Track weight every 2 to 4 weeks and adjust the plan with your veterinarian.

Table 1. Key steps in a safe weight-loss plan

Vets also treat obesity as a disease to be managed, not a blame game. Steady weight loss over months is safer than crash diets, and

checking for other illnesses that cause weight gain is part of good care. Owners who consult a veterinarian about weight are far more likely to succeed than those who try alone [5].

Risk factors associated with canine overweightness and obesity in an owner-reported survey. bioRxiv preprint. 2020. doi:10.1101/2020.01.06.896399.

Simple Habits That Help

- **Swap rewards.** Reward with play, walks or affection instead of food.
- **Make the family consistent.** Everyone in the household must follow the same feeding plan.
- **Slow down mealtime.** Food puzzles and slow feeders increase activity and satisfaction.
- **Keep fit together.** A daily walk helps both dog and owner.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The kindest thing you can do for a dog you love is to keep them lean. A lean dog lives longer, moves better and enjoys more years with you.

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