



## **PRESS RELEASE**

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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### **Does This Collar Make Me Look Fat? Obesity in Pets is a Serious Problem**

By the Vermont Veterinary Medical Association  
M. Kathleen Shaw, DVM

The obesity epidemic in America is not only affecting people, it is affecting our pets as well. Many pets are overweight, but often owners don't know it until they take their pet to the veterinarian for another reason. As veterinarians, it would be irresponsible of us to ignore your pet's weight when we do a physical exam, just as it would be for a physician to ignore a human patient's overweight condition. As your pet's medical caretakers, we need to bring it to your attention because we are responsible for your pet's health. So, Fido or Fluffy is a little pudgy. Does it matter? YES. Numerous studies have proven that pets who are overweight or obese are much more likely to develop diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, high blood pressure, asthma, and many other diseases.

How do you know if your pet is overweight? Since ideal weights vary by breed, a good way to judge your pet's weight is to place your hands on either side of its rib cage and feel for the ribs. You should be able to easily feel the ribs (but not see them). When viewed from above, your pet should have a waist and when viewed from the side should have a slightly tucked abdomen. If you can't feel the ribs and you can't see a waist from above, your pet is overweight. Still aren't sure? Ask your veterinarian.

Now, let's take a look at why our pets are becoming overweight and what we can do about it.

Our pets gain weight for the same simple reason that people do: they eat more calories than they use. We are the ones buying and giving the food, so we need to look at how we contribute to this problem. Some pets are expert beggars or even act like they haven't had breakfast, leading different members of the household to feed them more than once. Many of us substitute treats and extra food for affection. There is always that one person at home who sneaks the pet extra treats, and some of us are 'guilt' feeders. The animal begs, so we give just a few more kibbles. Unfortunately, those kibbles add up. Just a teaspoon - about 20 kibbles - extra per day for a cat adds up to a pound in a year. In a human, that's like gaining ten pounds! People food is a huge source of extra calories. A little cube of cheese to a small dog is like a human eating a couple of Big Macs. A pizza crust is the same. It all

adds up. Sometimes there is a medical reason for the weight gain. Sometimes it is related to a slower metabolism with age.

So, what can we do about our overweight pets? The first step is to have your veterinarian do a thorough physical to assess your pet's overall health and to help rule out any medical reasons for the weight gain. Perhaps your dog has a low thyroid level and needs some medication or maybe your cat has arthritis, which makes it painful to be active and burn off calories. Did you know that by age ten, 90% of cats have some evidence of arthritis seen on x-rays? What we often interpret as "slowing down" or "growing old" is often pain from arthritis. Who wants to exercise when it hurts? Your pet may even benefit from a prescription pet food specifically formulated to help your pet shed those extra pounds. Talk to your veterinarian about it when having your pet's physical exam.

Some things you can do at home to help control your pet's weight are to first do a family survey of who is feeding the pet what (including treats and people food) and when. You must get everyone on board to help your pet lose weight. Measure out your pet's food with a measuring cup. Avoid people food - it is extremely high in calories. If you must give treats, use vegetables (no raisins, plums, avocados, garlic, or onions), but remember that every food has calories, so unlimited amounts of any substance can cause weight gain. Substitute affection for *interactive* play time. Just because your pet has a fenced in yard or lots of toys does not mean they are going to actually exercise. Get a Frisbee or ball for the dog and play with them, and some fishing pole-type toys or a laser pointer for the cats. Even ten minutes a couple times a day will make a huge difference. Walking the dogs will help your health and theirs.

Weight loss isn't easy, but it can be done. It will help your pet to live a longer, healthier, and pain-free life.

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*The Vermont Veterinary Medical Association (VVMA), founded in 1898, is a professional organization of 360 veterinarians dedicated to compassionate animal care and quality medicine.*