

**Helping Overweight Animals**  
**Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.**  
**www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com**  
**Copyright ABA, Inc.**

We hear the message all the time that America is a country of overweight people. But it's not just our people who are overweight, so are our companion animals. According to several studies, at least one in four dogs and cats examined by veterinarians are overweight. According to Dr. Rhea Dodd, a local veterinarian and behaviorist, excess weight can create or worsen a variety of medical problems. Joint and bone problems, such as arthritis, can be made worse in both dogs and cats. Overweight cats are more prone to diabetes, heart and immune system problems and liver problems. The overall quality of life is much poorer for obese cats and dogs.

As with people, the basic causes of obesity are too much food and not enough exercise. With our busy schedules, we may not be exercising our animals enough. Our Dalmatians, Ashley and Mocha, spend a lot of time sleeping on our living room couch because often we are too busy to take them for walks. This lack of exercise leaves both them and us prone to gain weight. Too much food is the other part of the problem. Sometimes we leave food out all day or put a little extra food out because we don't want our animals to be hungry. We may be killing them with our kindness. Sometimes too, we just don't consider that the snacks and treats that we give our animals are adding extra calories they may not need. Dr. Dodd points out that some treats are really loaded with calories, which can make them the doggie equivalent of junk food. She points out that we all should be careful to monitor what kinds of treats and how many we give our pets.

As with most other problems, prevention is much easier than treatment. Starting your pet out from the very beginning with a good, carefully controlled diet and regular exercise can prevent most weight problems. Your veterinarian can help you design a healthy diet and exercise program for your animal for each of her life stages. For example, older pets have very different dietary needs than do puppies which have different needs than normal adults. Animals that are spayed or neutered often need fewer calories than do intact animals.

If your pet already has a weight problem, it is very important that you consult your veterinarian to put together a safe and effective weight loss program. According to Dr. Dodd, rapid weight loss and strenuous exercise can create serious health problems for overweight dogs and cats. Your veterinarian can help your pet lose those unwanted pounds safely and effectively. It's spring time! Let's get our animals in shape for summer!