



Pet Obesity Epidemic Fact Sheet

More than 90 million pets in the U.S. are overweight or obese, making weight the leading health threat to our nation’s companion animals today.

Sharp Increase in Obesity Rates

Data reported by Nationwide, the nation’s largest provider of pet health insurance, indicate that pet obesity is on the rise for the sixth consecutive year.

A whopping 58% of cats and 54% of dogs in the U.S. are classified as overweight or obese, according to 2015 research conducted by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP). For cats, 30% are overweight, and an additional 28% are “clinically obese”—more than 30% above ideal weight. For dogs, 34% are overweight and an additional 20% are obese.

These statistics reflect an alarming increase in clinical obesity in recent years. According to APOP statistics, the obesity rate for cats climbed from 22% in 2009 to the current 28% (2015). During this same time frame, the obesity rate in dogs rose from 9% in 2009 to 20% in 2015.

Obesity Shortens Lives

Just as in humans, excessive fat in pets increases the risk of often-preventable health conditions. In a 2017 press release, Nationwide reported the top obesity-related conditions found in dogs and cats based on 585,000 insured pets:

Most Common Obesity-Related Conditions in Dogs	Most Common Obesity-Related Conditions in Cats
1. Arthritis	1. Bladder/Urinary Tract Disease
2. Bladder/Urinary Tract Disease	2. Chronic Kidney Disease
3. Low Thyroid Hormone Production	3. Diabetes
4. Liver Disease	4. Asthma
5. Torn Knee Ligaments	5. Liver Disease
6. Diabetes	6. Arthritis
7. Diseased Disc in the Spine	7. High Blood Pressure
8. Chronic Kidney Disease	8. Heart Failure
9. Heart Failure	9. Gall Bladder Disorder
10. Fatty Growth	10. Immobility of Spine

Additionally, pet obesity has been linked with many forms of cancer and decreased life expectancy. APOP research bears this out—their findings indicate that the incidence of obesity decreases with age. The research shows that obesity is more common in young adult and early-senior-aged pets. This substantiates the theory that obesity increases medical problems and ultimately shortens lives. Heavier pets tend not to live as long as their slimmer counterparts.



Financial Costs of Obesity

In addition to taking a heavy toll on the health and well-being of pets, obesity brings a high monetary price tag. As an example, Nationwide recently reported 2015 statistics, shown in the table below. Keep in mind that these numbers reflect data from one insurer only—costs from other insurers and for the large number of uninsured pets is not included.

Financial Costs of Pet Obesity (2015)		
1.3 Million Claims for Obesity-Related Conditions		
A Total of More Than \$60 Million in Veterinary Expenses for These Claims		
Percentage Increase from the Prior 3 Years: 23%		
Most Common Claims and Costs		
Arthritis in Dogs	49,000 claims	\$295 average treatment fee per dog
Bladder or Urinary Tract Disease in Cats	5,000 claims	\$442 average treatment fee per cat

Move to Classify Pet Obesity as a Disease

In human medicine, the American Medical Association (AMA) officially classified obesity as a disease in 2013. Members of the APOP and other veterinary specialists are making a move to follow suit by requesting disease classification status for pet obesity.

The proposal may be presented to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) as early as summer of 2017. The group of specialists has also crafted a definition of pet obesity from a clinical point of view and is asking for a universal standardized body condition scoring system for pets.

As with human medicine, adoption of these standards could increase awareness among both veterinarians and pet parents and help veterinarians better identify, assess, and treat obesity.

Causes of Obesity

Multiple factors have been implicated as causes of the current pet obesity epidemic:

- Lack of awareness. With obesity becoming so common in both humans and pets, pet parents don't always recognize excessive weight in their pets. As a result, action steps to control portions and reduce pet weight may be delayed.
- Compliance. It is difficult for pet parents to comply with portion control or weight maintenance programs. This is often compounded in multi-pet homes.
- Genetic components, susceptibilities within certain breeds, single-gene mutations, and neuroendocrine pathways in terms of responses to food.
- Unmeasured feeding, lack of portion control, and free feeding.
- Feeding of high-calorie foods and table scraps.
- Feeding for emotional reasons—showing love for the pet through extra feeding or using food treats as frequent rewards.
- Lack of adequate exercise in proportion to calories consumed.



Controlling and Preventing Obesity

Steps that veterinarian/pet parent partners can take to prevent or reverse pet obesity:

- Schedule annual pet wellness exams with veterinarians to assess overall health, monitor weight, and establish optimal dietary programs to maintain or reduce weight.
- **Maintain a consistent diet by controlling the amount of food given to each pet. Restrict calories (portion control) as part of the veterinarian-prescribed feeding protocol.**
- Avoid feeding table scraps and regulate treats given.
- Establish a regular and fun exercise routine.
- Replace food treats with other rewarding activities, such as extra play time or holding and petting.

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